

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER

A PRIDE AND PREJUDICE VARIATION

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Chapter 1

12th April 1812, The Swan

Fitzwilliam Darcy winced as the loud voices of the ostlers brawling under his room fell on his ears, and the pounding in his head went up another notch. He turned away from the window just in time to see his valet Banes supervising the removal of the last of his luggage. He looked around the spacious room dully, except for his favourite valise all his things had been taken down to the carriage. It was now time to go back to Darcy House. With a deep sigh, he moved to pick up his gloves lying on the bed. He looked down as his left foot encountered something on the floor and noticed the latest book of Wordsworth's poems he had made an unsuccessful attempt to read last night. It was never a good idea to read when one is two parts disguised^[1] and heartsore to boot. But he had stubbornly tried to prove that things were fine, that it did not feel as if his world was falling apart. Ha! What a joke.

The book must have dropped when he fell asleep, still trying to make sense of the words dancing in front of his eyes. Banes would have missed it, as it was lying almost completely under the bed. He shook his head and bent to pick it up. As he lifted the book, he saw the papers underneath that must have fallen out from it. His hand clenched as understanding dawned - *the letter*. The letter he had read so many times in the last three days that he had lost count. The letter he had most improperly written to *her*, an unmarried woman wholly

unconnected to him. Although his heart steadfastly refused to understand that! He had written to her because his sense of justice and pride, the pride she had trampled so badly, demanded that he put up his defence against the unfair accusations she had laid at his door. Unfortunately, he had not been able to give the letter to her. He had written it long into the night after she had rejected his proposal so cruelly. After a fitful sleep of barely an hour, he had gone to the park she frequented in her morning rambles and waited – and waited, but she never came. After waiting fruitlessly for nearly two hours, he had returned to Rosings dispiritedly. Only to come face to face with perfidy from those he had least expected. It had been eye-opening to realize the shallowness of some blood ties and hollowness of that elusive but all-important notion of good breeding.

He shuddered again as he remembered his aunt's strident tones as she had berated her daughter and his poor cousin, Anne –

“... not said anything to you until now, but this time situation forces me to speak my mind. You would have to be blind not to notice how Darcy is salivating after that Bennet chit. How his eyes follow her every move.”

“Mother!” Anne's soft voice had risen in horrified distress at the crude insinuations.

“Do not mother me, Miss! I know what I am talking about. If we do not take any steps now, he may do something foolish. I used to think Darcy knows what is due to his name and family, but I am no longer so sure of that. Before he returns to London this time, I want you betrothed to him.”

“What do you think I can do to ensure this, mother, short of proposing to him myself? And even then, I am not sure he will answer in the affirmative.”

“This is no time for levity! There are many ways in which a lady can force a gentleman to propose.”

“I truly hope you are not suggesting what I think you are!”

“And why not, if Darcy is proving as stubborn as a mule? You will do well to call him to your chamber tonight on some pretext and then pretend to trip or some such. I think even you can manage that! And as soon as he

attempts to catch you, Mrs Jenkinson and I will rush in and do the needful."

He had only partially heard Anne protest in scandalized tones as he had stood frozen in shock. Was this an illustration of good breeding his aunt was forever prosing about? He had only been able to move when Richard had gently pushed him from behind and guided him into his chamber. He had bid him sit and then offered him a stiff brandy that had slowly made him return to his senses, even though the shock did not completely wear off. Good old Richard! Always ready with support and succour.

After that unintended but propitious bit of eavesdropping, he had felt too disgusted to stay in Rosings for a minute longer than was necessary. When apprised of his feelings, Richard had been in complete agreement. They had left within the hour without taking their leave of their aunt and cousin. The only regret he had was not being able to thank Anne for her staunch support, but she had already retired to her room and had asked her maid not to be disturbed by anyone. In his hurry to shake the dust of Rosings off his feet, however, he had forgotten that he had not delivered his letter and the enclosed defence of his character to Elizabeth Bennet. It was only when they were few miles from Rosings that he remembered about the letter and realized that Miss Elizabeth still considered him a scoundrel and the real scoundrel - a poor, mistreated victim! Despite his anger with her, he had felt uneasy that he had left her unprotected against Wickham's wiles.

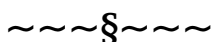
With a bitter twist to his mouth, he now looked down at the letter in his hand and for a moment contemplated throwing it in the fire blazing in the grate. But then, with a groan of frustration, he folded it and put it back in the book and kept them both in his valise. He knew it was quite pathetic of him, but he could not throw away his last tangible connection to her. So what if she had completely misunderstood him and so cruelly rejected his hand and his heart.

"Shall I take that, Mr Darcy?"

He came out of his reverie to see that Banes had returned and was

holding out his hand for the valise. He shook his head and replied, "It is quite all right Banes, I will carry it."

He picked up his gloves and motioned for Banes to proceed. Once his valet departed, Darcy stood still for a few moments, feeling quite unequal to the task of facing the world. But then he straightened his shoulders and followed his valet out of his chamber.



The carriage was already waiting for him when he came out of the inn after settling his accounts. He had taken but a few steps towards it when he heard the soft nickering of his horse, Poseidon.

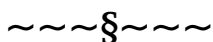
"I will ride," he told Banes as he suddenly changed directions. The ride may do some good for his aching head he thought as he put his valise in the saddlebag and mounted Poseidon.

"I will be taking things a little slowly. Please do not wait for me if I fall behind and do not catch up with you immediately," he threw over his shoulder to Banes, who nodded unhappily as he made his way to climb the steps of the carriage. Darcy could understand his misgivings, he had not been his usual self ever since they had left Rosings. He grimaced as he looked back at the past few days. They had not travelled far from Rosings when they were met by a messenger entrusted with an urgent message for Richard. Luckily the messenger was an old retainer of the Earl of Matlock, Richard's father. He had recognized the Darcy livery and stopped them midway to hand over the message. Richard's leave was at an end, and he was immediately needed for an important assignment in Dover. Like a true soldier, he was always ready to travel at a moment's notice. It was not too long after meeting the rider that Richard was mounted on his horse, waving his farewell to Darcy as the cousins parted ways much earlier than expected.

Once Richard left, the horrors of the last twenty-four hours began to tell on Darcy. The pain of Elizabeth's vituperative refusal and the shock of his aunt's treachery suddenly weighed on him so heavily that

he started to feel physically ill. When his carriage made a stop at The Swan for a change of horses, he stepped inside feeling the need for a stiff drink. In the process of requesting a private parlour in which to sit and lick his wounds, he somehow found himself asking the innkeeper for a room to stay. Not many minutes later, a bewildered Banes was supervising the removal of his master's luggage from the carriage to the best chamber the inn boasted of. And this was not the only uncharacteristic and less than exemplary behaviour from him that poor Banes had witnessed in the past few days.

Darcy grimaced in mingled pain and shame as Poseidon jerked forward. He was not proud of the way he had behaved during his stay at the inn. Keeping himself confined to his chambers, imbibing more than he ever remembered doing - he had been totally uncaring of the world around him. It was not a behaviour he had ever exhibited in the past. His parents would have been appalled if they had seen him indulging in such conduct. It was only when he had woken up this morning with a pounding head, disoriented and momentarily unable to recall where he was, that the full realization of his unbecoming and foolish conduct had dawned on him. Miss Elizabeth's rejection might make him feel dejected and heartsore, but that was no reason to behave irresponsibly. He really could not afford to wallow in maudlin behaviour and ignore his responsibilities – the welfare of too many people depended on him. He had never shirked his obligations in the past and was not about to begin to do so now. With that resolution in mind, he had called for Banes to begin packing.



Although he had told Banes that he would be taking things slowly, his agitated musings had made him do exactly the opposite and the carriage had fallen behind him some time ago. He had been riding briskly for nearly an hour when he started to feel somewhat lightheaded. He glanced around, looking for a place to rest. Thankfully, he caught a glimpse of a stream flowing in the woods surrounding the road some way ahead. On the spur of the moment, he

decided to stop there for a while and take some rest.

Ten minutes later, he was feeling quite refreshed after washing his face and drinking his fill of the cool, crystal-clear waters of the gently flowing stream. Unfortunately, the dizziness had not completely left him. It was only then he remembered that this morning he had just a cup of coffee and a slice of toast for breakfast. Darcy cursed his impulsiveness of an hour ago as he felt an urgent need for some sustenance. Had he given Banes sufficient warning, that ever-dependable chap would have ensured that a filling repast was in the saddlebag. Darcy thought as he turned to look at the said saddlebag a little frustratedly. All of a sudden, he was moving towards his horse at a quick pace and had the saddlebag opened in no time.

“Good old Banes,” Darcy muttered as he stood gazing down at four juicy apples nestling in there.

“Sorry old boy but today you will have to share your snack, ” he told Poseidon, offering him two of the apples.

He then sat under a nearby oak tree and ate his share with enjoyment. Once he had finished his meagre meal, he looked around, taking in the tranquillity of the surroundings. *‘Elizabeth would love this beautiful and serene place.’* The thought struck him as he remembered the love for nature she had exhibited both in Hertfordshire and at Rosings. *‘Why in heaven’s name am I thinking about that unfair and maddening woman all over again?’* he chastised himself in disgust. The pleasure from a minute ago slowly drained out of him as he finally admitted to himself that Elizabeth Bennet was there to stay in his head - and in his heart - despite everything she had done or rather *not done*. With an inaudible groan, he closed his eyes and tried to empty his mind of all thoughts. He rested his head on the tree trunk and waited for the place to rework its magic on him. In this desire, he was aided by his tired body.

It was only a little while later when Poseidon lifted his gaze from the grass and looked at Darcy as he heard the sound of a soft snore. He nickered softly and then resigned himself to wait patiently for his master to wake up.

Later, Darcy was never sure what made him wake up with a jerk. For a moment, he felt disoriented and closed his eyes again. He stood up after a while and swore under his breath as he looked at the sun. Its direction told him that he had been asleep for not less than two hours. A cursory glance at his pocket watch confirmed this. His carriage would have overtaken him long ago. Although he had told Banes not to look for him, some strange feeling was unexpectedly making him quite eager to be on his way. After a quick drink of water for himself and Poseidon, a swift brush of his attire and an uncaring hand through his hair, he was riding out of the woods briskly.

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Darcy had not been riding for long when he came upon a scene of a carriage accident. Intent on offering help to the occupants of the carriage, he brought Poseidon to a sudden halt and got down. He surveyed his surroundings as he swiftly tied Poseidon to a nearby tree. The way the carriage was situated suggested that like him, it was also travelling towards the metropolis. The intermittent but heavy rainfall in the past week seemed to have taken its toll on the road. There was a deep rut filled with mud and dirty water, nearly in the middle of the road. The front left wheel of the carriage appeared to have fallen in it. If the marks on the ground were anything to go by, the driver had tried to prevent the calamity, unfortunately unsuccessfully. The wheel, still stuck inside the rut was twisted severely. It had further damaged the front axle, which appeared to have broken where the pole was attached to it. This Darcy felt was a blessing in disguise as snapping of the pole from the axle had resulted in detaching the horses from the carriage. *‘Otherwise, God alone knows what havoc the driverless coach would have wrought,’* he thought as he observed the unconscious man, presumably the coachman, lying on the ground, at a short distance from the carriage. Both the horses, still with their harness on, were standing near a tree a few yards away and the broken portion of the pole was dangling behind them. Apart from the coachman, he could see two more occupants of the carriage – both women - lying prone on the ground. It worried him a little that he could not discern any

movement from all the three victims of the unfortunate accident.

He first went to check on the coachman who was nearest to him. As Darcy drew near the injured man, it soon became evident that he had suffered a dislocation in his left shoulder. He appeared to have passed out because of the shock since Darcy could not see any other major injury apart from a small gash to his head. Thankfully, his pulse also appeared to be quite steady. Darcy had learned how to put back a dislocated shoulder in the hunting fields eons ago. However, before he set to this task, he thought it prudent to check on the remaining occupants of the carriage. He next went to a frail woman who had been flung quite a distance from the carriage. The lady appeared to be about sixty years of age, and her clothes, though clean, were worn and faded. *'Maybe some poor farmer's wife,'* he mused as he stood looking down at her sadly. Her staring eyes and the unnatural angle to her head had already told him that the poor woman was beyond human help. He gently closed her eyes and said a quick prayer for her before moving on to the last victim.

The second woman had fallen face down not too far away from the open carriage door, which was tilting alarmingly on its hinges. There was something about the woman's rich dark hair that made his heartbeat just a little bit faster.

"Excuse me, ma'am?" he called out when he observed a slight movement in her right arm. He waited a while for a response, but on not receiving one, he bent to carefully shift her position so that the woman was now facing upwards. He looked at her face and almost stumbled in shock. Facing him lay the unconscious form of Elizabeth Bennet!

"Miss Elizabeth!" he exclaimed and winced when his voice came out unnaturally loud, but it had no effect on the inert woman on the ground. He spent an anxious minute or so examining her. There was a deep cut in her head that was bleeding quite steadily, if not profusely. A cursory look at the ground revealed the cause of the injury. When she had fallen, her head had hit a sharp rock protruding out of the ground. Additionally, there were some abrasions on her left hand,

which seemed to have borne the brunt of her fall. There were no outward signs of any other injury from what he could observe. ‘*That gash on her head looks nasty and needs urgent attention,*’ Darcy thought worriedly as he squatted beside Elizabeth and gently brushed the hair from her forehead to get a closer look.

“First things first,” he muttered after his examination as he sat down on the ground and started to untie the knot of his cravat. He gently lifted her head onto his leg, put a clean handkerchief over the wound and securely tied it with his cravat. By the time he had finished tying the bandage, Elizabeth had started to stir. Suddenly she opened her eyes and stared straight into his own troubled ones.

Her eyes widened in shock, and with a mumbled, “Mr Darcy! Am I never to have any peace again?” she closed them again with a soft moan.

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Chapter 2

When Elizabeth slowly came to, her first sensation was of acute pain. It felt as if someone had put her head in a vice and was tightening the screws slowly. Her eyelids felt glued to her eyes, and it was with great difficulty that she managed to force them open. She immediately believed herself to have woken up in a nightmare when she gazed straight into Mr Darcy's dark, piercing eyes.

She promptly shut her eyes again and tried to control her rising panic, not knowing that her shocked brain had made her utter her first thoughts aloud. Her head was hurting awfully, and she found it difficult to open her eyes again. She gave up the effort after few unsuccessful attempts.

After a while, she tried to make sense of her surroundings. *'Where am I? More importantly, why is Mr Darcy here with me? Has he not caused me enough difficulties that he had to come back like a proverbial bad penny? Firstly, he dared to propose to me in that insulting manner and then disappeared from Rosings without intimating his aunt. It was because of his reprehensible conduct and his impossible aunt that I was forced to cut short my visit and flee like a criminal from Charlotte's home.'*

Elizabeth swallowed as memories came flooding back, and she remembered Lady Catherine's strident tones, *"Where is he, Miss Bennet? Where has he gone?"*

"I am sorry I do not take your meaning, Lady Catherine. Who it is you are talking about?" Elizabeth had asked in a confused voice.

They had all been invited to tea at Rosings the very next day after Mr Darcy had made his ill-fated proposal. It had felt odd to be invited to tea two days in a row by the toplofty Lady Catherine. Elizabeth had wanted to decline once again as she did not know how she would face Mr Darcy after their acrimonious exchange of the previous evening. However, Mr Collins

had been adamant. It seemed Lady Catherine had specially mentioned her in the invitation, and he would not hear of her insulting his patroness by her refusal. Not wanting to cause trouble for her hosts, especially Charlotte, she had given in. Only when she was faced with the inquisition did she understand the reason for the special mention.

"Darcy, who else? Where has he gone?" The testy response had brought Elizabeth out of her musings.

"How would I know where Mr Darcy has gone? I do not keep track of his comings and goings," she had protested.

"There is no need to act coy, Miss. Do not think I am not aware of how you have been employing your arts and allurements to snare my nephew."

Elizabeth was horrified to realize that apart from arrogance, the aunt and the nephew seemed to be suffering from the same delusions. When she had looked around she was gratified to observe that Charlotte and Maria appeared as dumbfounded as she, and Miss de Bourgh looked mortified at her mother's unseemly conduct.

She might have tried to laugh off the absurd accusations had her buffoonish cousin not jumped into the conversation with an accusation. "I did not realize that I had been housing a viper in our midst, cousin! I always knew that you were an ungrateful hoyden but have understood only now that you are also a scheming, immoral hussy! How could you dare to look so far above your station? How could you betray my noble patroness, who has shown you nothing but kindness?"

The hurtful and unjust words coming on top of Lady Catherine's vile accusations had made her lose control over her tongue a second time in less than four and twenty hours. She had responded with a scathing, "I would not use any arts and allurements on Mr Darcy even if I knew how. I would not marry that cruel and arrogant man if he were the last man left on this earth, and so I informed him last evening when he made me a proposal!" Elizabeth stopped speaking abruptly as she saw the uniformly stupefied expressions of her audience, realizing too late that anger had made her say things that were best left unsaid!

A stunned silence had followed her angry proclamations. She had begun to get quite concerned at the awful shade of purple Lady Catherine had

turned when the silence was broken by that irate lady.

“Made a proposal of marriage! To you? Do not make me laugh, you lying trollop! Men of my nephew’s ilk do not make proposals to women of your station. At least not of marriage,” the old lady had sneered at her. Before Elizabeth’s shocked brain could make sense of the demeaning words, the lady had continued. “I now understand what you are trying to do with your lies. You are trying to force Darcy’s hand by making these absurd claims. But let me warn you while I am alive, I will not let you succeed in your vile machinations!”

Suddenly she had addressed a shaking Mr Collins, “I do not want to see any of your faces one minute longer, and Mr Collins if you know what is good for you, this lying hussy would not be part of your household by tomorrow morning. You all may leave now.”

She had then turned back to Elizabeth and hissed, “I do hope you are not foolish enough to repeat your lies outside of these walls. Do not forget that I can ruin you and your family with a flick of my fingers.”

Elizabeth had been in too much of a shock at her vitriol to remember much about their walk back to the parsonage. However, she had been cognizant of the continuous argument between Charlotte and Mr Collins, even if she had not paid any attention to its content. She had also been vaguely aware of Maria’s hand gently resting under her arm and had felt grateful for the show of support.

It was only when they had reached the parsonage and Charlotte had offered her some tea that she had become conscious of her surroundings. She was then horrified to realize that Mr Collins was quite keen to turn her out of his home that very evening! Charlotte was angrily arguing against it. It was maybe for the first time that Elizabeth had seen her friend speak so heatedly.

“Mr Collins, Eliza is your cousin, and she is under your protection at present. How can you even contemplate turning her out from our home? Where would she go at this time of the day?”

“I do not care where she goes. She should have thought about that before she tried her hand...” His vulgar rant had been interrupted by a knock at the door. Soon the maid had announced the arrival of Miss de Bourgh and

her companion Mrs Jenkinson to the surprised occupants of the parlour in the parsonage.

“Miss de Bourgh, I welcome you to my humble abode. You did not need to put yourself out in this manner, ma’am. I was just going to send my cousin away as directed by your revered mother.”

“You will do nothing of the kind.”

Elizabeth had been surprised to hear such imperious tones from a woman she had considered timid and colourless all this while.

“But...” Mr Collins had begun to protest but was unceremoniously interrupted. “Mr Collins, you do know that I am the heir to Rosings, don’t you?”

As Mr Collins had gulped and nodded, Miss Anne de Bourgh had smiled at him beatifically, then turned to Elizabeth. Surprising her still further, Miss de Bourgh had handsomely apologised for her mother’s unacceptable conduct. Although Elizabeth could do nought else but accept the apology, she had been quite bewildered by the other woman’s gracious behaviour. Did it not matter to Miss de Bourgh that her betrothed had only yesterday proposed to another woman, she had mused with some confusion. At least she did not appear to hold Elizabeth responsible for Mr Darcy’s conduct. Or maybe the cousins were not really betrothed? Even Mr Darcy could not be reprehensible enough to propose marriage to another while residing under the roof of the one he had already agreed to marry, she had pondered doubtfully.

Miss de Bourgh had then addressed Charlotte. “I am truly sorry Mrs Collins, that Miss Bennet will have to cut short her stay with you, but I think you would also understand that she needs to go away from here as soon as possible? For her own comfort and safety?”

When Charlotte had nodded unhappily, Miss de Bourgh had once again taken control of the situation. “While I cannot put any of the carriages from Rosings at your disposal, for obvious reasons, I am very willing to provide whatever help I can for Miss Bennet’s safe journey. You just have to tell me.”

For a few moments, there was an uneasy silence, then Charlotte had

cleared her throat. "If Eliza could stay here for one more day, both her problems of conveyance and a chaperone for her journey would be resolved," she had finally said

When Miss de Bourgh raised her brow enquiringly, Charlotte had continued, "Our cook Mrs Broad's brother is a coachman, and he is coming to meet her tomorrow. Since he would be travelling back to London the day after, Mrs Broad had requested him to take Mrs Dawson and her granddaughter along with him. I think Eliza can comfortably travel with them if she could stay with us for one more day."

"Impossible! Lady Catherine will be very displeased if she finds that Cousin Elizabeth is still..."

"Yes... yes, we all are aware of that, Mr Collins." Anne de Bourgh had impatiently cut into Mr Collins lamentations.

"I am afraid your husband is quite correct, Mrs Collins. If Miss Bennet stays with you beyond tomorrow morning, my mother will become aware of the fact soon enough. The situation then will not be comfortable for any of you." When Charlotte's expression fell at her response, she added with a smile, "Although once she comes to know that Miss Bennet has left your home, my mother would not really have any further interest in ascertaining where Miss Bennet has gone - to London or... say... to Mrs Dawson's house."

"Oh." Charlotte had smiled once she understood what Miss de Bourgh was trying to say. "I am sure Mrs Dawson would be happy to help us. Also, cook and Sarah would be quite willing to keep our secret but..." Charlotte had stopped mid-sentence as she glanced uneasily at her husband.

"As long as Miss Bennet is not under your roof come tomorrow morning, I do not think Mr Collins would have any reason to ply my mother with irrelevant details like Miss Bennet's destination. Is that not so, sir?" Miss de Bourgh had given him an imperious stare.

"Y...yes, of course, Miss de Bourgh," Mr Collins had stuttered.

"Right then, now that everything is settled, I will take your leave." When Miss de Bourgh and Mrs Jenkinson had got up to leave, Elizabeth, Charlotte and Maria had accompanied them outside.

For a few moments, Elizabeth had felt quite discontented at the manner everything had been 'settled' without even an attempt to seek her consent but had immediately felt ashamed for her ingratitude. Both Charlotte and Miss de Bourgh had dared to defy Mr Collins and Lady Catherine respectively for her comfort. While she could lay the claims of childhood friendship in Charlotte, she had none over Miss de Bourgh. Why that lady had gone out of her way to help a woman wholly unconnected to her continued to puzzle Elizabeth, but good manners required that she convey her gratitude for the kindness.

"Miss de Bourgh?"

"Yes, Miss Bennet?"

"Thank you so much for coming to my rescue just now, although I really cannot understand why you chose to defy your mother for a virtual stranger like me?"

"Can you not, Miss Bennet? Well, I tried to do whatever I could because it was the right thing to do and..." Miss de Bourgh had paused to give her an enigmatic smile and added, "Darcy would have wanted me to help you. Also, you do not have to thank me. If sometime in future you realize that appearances can often be deceptive, that would be thanks enough for me." With those cryptic words, she had climbed into her carriage and had soon departed. While Elizabeth had already realized that appearances were in fact quite deceptive in Miss de Bourgh's own case, she felt sure that Mr Darcy's baffling cousin had not been talking about herself!

The things had proceeded exactly how Charlotte and Miss de Bourgh had contemplated. Mrs Dawson had warmly welcomed Elizabeth in her home. Her kindness had taken away some of the sting of having to leave Charlotte's home so unceremoniously. Mr Smith, the coachman, had come calling in his carriage very early this morning, and soon after, she, Mrs Dawson and Millie had started their journey towards the metropolis.

Mrs Dawson had nodded off not too long after their journey had commenced. Elizabeth had occupied herself in telling stories to the adorable Millie. The little girl's curious questions had kept her well entertained, but halfway through the journey, even Millie had

succumbed to tiredness and fell asleep. Elizabeth had just begun to feel a little drowsy herself when all of a sudden, the carriage had started to skid. Soon after she heard Mr Smith shouting something urgently. Before she could make sense of what he was trying to convey, there was an almighty jerk, and amidst a cacophony of screams of horses, man, and splintering wood, the carriage had tilted alarmingly to the left, and its door was thrown open. To her horror, Elizabeth saw a still sleeping Mrs Dawson being flung out of that open door. Almost on a reflex, she had jumped forward to catch hold of the old lady. Unfortunately, the carriage had continued to tilt forward, and she had lost her footing in the process. Her last recollection was that of herself falling out of the swinging door of the carriage.

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*‘So, our carriage suffered an accident! I hope Mrs Dawson is well and...’*

“Miss Bennet... Elizabeth?” Elizabeth’s ponderings were interrupted by an insistent voice in her ears and a gentle hand on her cheek. The urgency in the voice made her try and open her eyes once again. She looked up at the concerned face bending over her and whispered, “Mrs Dawson? How is she?”

Elizabeth was disconcerted to see an expression of regret cross Mr Darcy’s face before he asked gently, “The old lady you were travelling with?”

Elizabeth tried to nod, but the pain in her head made her change her mind, and she replied with a grimace, “Yes, I hope she is well?” Her eyes widened in distress when Mr Darcy slowly shook his head.

“I am really sorry, Miss Bennet, but Mrs Dawson did not survive the accident,” he replied sombrely.

“Oh no... and... and Millie?” she asked fearfully.

“Millie?” Darcy asked in confusion.

“Yes, Millie. Mrs Dawson’s three-year-old granddaughter.”

Almost involuntarily, Darcy looked around them and then said, “I am afraid I did not...” He broke off as they both heard a small childish

whimper. Darcy quickly turned his head towards the open door of the carriage and murmured, "I think the child is still inside the carriage, Miss Bennet."

He then shifted his position and started removing his greatcoat. The action suddenly made Elizabeth realize that all this while her head had been resting comfortably on Mr Darcy's lap - it still was! Before she could even begin to blush, Mr Darcy had folded his coat and put it on the ground. He then gently placed her head on the makeshift pillow and asked, "Are you comfortable, Miss Bennet?" When she replied in the affirmative, he nodded and stood up. "I will go and check on the little moppet." He was already at the door of the carriage by the time he finished speaking.

Darcy looked inside in the carriage with trepidation but was immediately reassured to find a beautiful and thankfully unhurt little girl. Very scared - but unhurt. For a moment, he stood shaking his head at the strange workings of the Almighty. In an accident in which an old lady had sadly perished, and the coachman and Miss Bennet had sustained grievous injuries, the child appeared to have escaped completely unhurt. Another pitiful whimper from the child, however, made him come out of his musings and focus on the little one. She was sitting on the floor of the carriage with contents of a food basket and a flask of water scattered around her. Although she was no longer crying, her striking violet eyes were still wet with tears. For a fleeting moment, Darcy felt a jolt of recognition, but it soon faded away.

"Millie?" he said softly and extended his arm towards the child but dropped it immediately when she cowered back.

"It is all right, sweetheart; I will not hurt you. Come, I will take you to Miss Elizabeth." Darcy extended his hand again as he smiled and tried to coax the frightened child.

Elizabeth, who had been observing the interaction somewhat anxiously, took a sharp breath at the sudden change the smile brought out in Mr Darcy's habitually stern countenance. She had known him for so many months, but it was the first time she was observing such a broad and open smile on his face. A smile that suddenly rendered him

not only impossibly attractive but also much more... approachable? Millie also must have thought so because only a short while later, Elizabeth noticed a small hand reach out from inside the carriage and catch hold of the one Mr Darcy was holding out. If at all possible, the smile broadened some more as Mr Darcy bent forward to pick up the little girl. He picked up something else from the floor of the carriage and quickly made his way back towards Elizabeth. As soon as Millie's eyes fell on Elizabeth, she lunged forward with a soft cry of, "Beth!"

Darcy lowered the child to the ground next to Elizabeth while she attempted to sit up.

"Please wait, Miss Bennet. Let me assist you." Darcy hurriedly put down the flask of water he had picked from the carriage and came forward to help her sit up. For a few moments after she sat upright, Elizabeth felt dizzy and leaned her head back on the arm holding her up. After a few deep breaths, she began to feel much better and sat a little straighter.

"Miss Bennet?" She looked up at Mr Darcy and was disconcerted to find his face so near to her own. Feeling embarrassed, she quickly looked away.

"Yes?" She asked the ground.

"Would you be all right on your own for a little while? I would prefer to put back the coachman's shoulder before he regains complete consciousness. As it is, the experience would be quite painful for the poor chap."

Elizabeth felt ashamed that she had not given a single thought to Mr Smith since she had regained her senses. Stifling her discomfort, she said, "Has Mr Smith dislocated his shoulder? Poor man! Millie and I will be quite all right here, Mr Darcy. Please attend to Mr Smith, you do not need to worry about us." She risked a glance at him again as he removed the supporting arm from around her and stood up.

Darcy smiled and nodded towards the flask he had set next to her. "You and Millie both should have a drink of water. You will feel better."

Millie, who had scooted near to Elizabeth as soon as she had sat up, caught hold of her hand to grab her attention and asked, “Gran-ma?”

Elizabeth and Darcy exchanged a stricken glance. For some time, there was complete silence as both of them felt at a loss on how to respond to the innocent query. Then Elizabeth swallowed hard, caught the girl to herself and replied, “Grand Ma was feeling tired, sweetheart, and she is sleeping at the moment. We will let her take rest for a while, hmm?”

When Millie nodded, Elizabeth offered her a drink from the flask and motioned to Darcy to go to Mr Smith. He immediately did so after throwing her a grateful glance. Once she had a sip of water herself, Elizabeth felt strong enough to go and sit under a nearby tree. She took care to ensure that Millie did not get a glimpse of poor Mrs Dawson. For the next half an hour or so while she tried to keep Millie engaged, she got a glimpse of Mr Darcy, the efficient master of Pemberley in action. First, he set the coachman’s shoulder and fashioned a sling for it using the man’s cravat. He even offered the afflicted man the contents of his hipflask, presumably to dull the pain of his ministrations. Then he went to check on the scared horses, one of whom appeared to be suffering from a strained tendon. After cutting them loose from the dangling remnants of the carriage, he tied them to the nearest tree. He then went back to the coachman, and the men engaged in a long conversation.

Despite herself Elizabeth found herself admiring Mr Darcy’s industry and competence. Her second-hand knowledge of the nobility had built an image of a class of men who rarely lifted a hand to perform even their own ablutions! But here was an esteemed member of the very same nobility so calmly assisting strangers - and one foe (surely he must hate her now after the vicious manner in which she had thrown his proposal back at his face!), in such difficult circumstances. Not at all worried about getting his hands dirty, quite literally! He had also been so gentle with Millie. All of a sudden she remembered his angry face when he had so cruelly enumerated the reasons he had been reluctant to offer marriage to her and shuddered involuntarily. She found it difficult to believe that man and the one in front of her now

were one and the same. *‘What an utterly confusing and annoying man,’* she huffed to herself, then looked at Millie. The tired child had fallen asleep, her head resting gently on Elizabeth’s lap.

“Miss Bennet?”

Elizabeth looked up to find the object of her confused musings standing in front of her.

“Yes, Mr Darcy?”

“I had a chat with Smith. It seems the stagecoach has already passed through this place some time ago.” Darcy sighed and gave a rueful shake of his head. “All this while I was hoping that some other traveller would happen upon us and offer assistance, but it is nearly an hour since I came upon you all and we have not seen anyone else! There is nothing for it but for us to travel to Bassingtonstoke. I want an apothecary to have a look at your injury as early as possible.”

“Bassingtonstoke?”

“Yes, it is a small village less than three miles to the east from where we stand. We - Millie, you and I will travel thither and seek help. Smith has elected to stay here with Mrs Dawson and to guard his carriage and horses.”

When Mr Darcy mentioned Mrs Dawson, Elizabeth’s gaze automatically swivelled to where the poor woman lay. She was no longer there! Darcy, who had followed her gaze, responded before Elizabeth could ask the question. “I ... ah... I moved her inside the carriage to protect her from the forces of nature.” He looked up at the sky as he spoke. “It looks as if it would not be too long before it starts to rain.”

While she had been busy musing about Mr Darcy’s confusing conduct, the man had been busy acting in a fashion meant to confuse her still further. Just now, he had demonstrated a thoughtfulness she could not imagine associating with him before now.

When she kept silent, Mr Darcy spoke again. “I think we should also be on our way soon, that is if you are feeling better.”

Not a little disconcerted, she cleared her throat. “I am ready to go



when you are, Mr Darcy. Er... how will we go?" she asked, feeling foolish at her rhetorical question as she glanced nervously at Mr Darcy's huge stallion.

"I am sorry, but I cannot offer you the choice of your favourite mode of transport, Miss Elizabeth. At present, you are hardly in a position to walk three miles." Elizabeth looked at him sharply, but there was no hint of contempt in his expression that she had imagined just rueful amusement.

"I will go and get Poseidon," he said after a moment's awkward silence. As he went, Mr Smith came to ask after her wellbeing and apologised profusely for the accident. Elizabeth tried her best to offer him some solace. He still appeared quite shocked at the happenings, and she could hardly blame him. Even she was finding it hard to believe that Mrs Dawson was no longer with them. *'What will happen to Millie now?'* The thought came unbidden as she glanced down at the sleeping child uneasily. Before she could ponder on it any further, Mr Darcy was back with his horse.

Elizabeth gulped as she looked at the magnificent animal. It really was huge! She requested Mr Smith to pick up the sleeping Millie, then took a deep breath and got up gamely. She decided against revealing her unease with horses. Somehow her pride rebelled at any show of weakness in front of Mr Darcy.

"Come, I will give you a leg up," Darcy offered and then proceeded to suit actions to his words.

Elizabeth mounted the horse awkwardly, and for a moment, felt petrified enough to contemplate begging Mr Darcy to help her down immediately. Slowly, however, sanity returned as she tried breathing slowly through her nose. As Mr Darcy had said, there was no other option before them. She would just have to overcome her fear.

Darcy, who had thought of accompanying Miss Bennet on the carriage horse that was still fit to be ridden, released an inaudible sigh. Even if he had missed the petrified gleam in her eyes as she mounted Poseidon, the tensed manner in which she held herself made it clear that Miss Bennet was scared of horses. She would not be able to

manage Poseidon on her own, especially with that injury to her head. He would have to accompany her on foot and hope they would reach the village before the skies opened up or Miss Bennet showed any further ill effects of her wound.

If he had still harboured any doubts, they were soon laid to rest as the little girl in his arms woke up just then, took one look at Poseidon and immediately hid her face in his neck with a wailed - "NO HOSS!" Darcy's eyebrow reached his hairline. He was to accompany not one but two females who were terrified of horses, with one of them atop a sixty stone Arabian. Just wonderful! After a moment, he gave himself a mental shrug. Fitzwilliam Darcy always met any challenge that life threw at him head-on, and he will do so now as well. Especially when Miss Bennet was being so brave about it all! He threw her a tender look that she missed, and then he bent his head to murmur softly in Millie's ears, "All right, sweetheart, No hoss."

They bid farewell to Smith with a promise to send help at the earliest and were soon off to Bassingtonstoke.

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Chapter 3

Only after they had been travelling for nearly ten minutes did Elizabeth feel comfortable enough to loosen her death grip on Poseidon's mane and look around her. She glanced at Mr Darcy and found him attempting to distract Millie from periodically peeking at Poseidon and then hiding her face in his neck with a soft whimper. Elizabeth had to marvel at the expertise with which he was handling the child and her antics. She felt sure that his patience was getting tested, but there was no sign of irritation in his demeanour. Feeling rather charitable towards the man, she found herself addressing him before she could think better of it.

"When you offered to take us to Bassingtonstoke, sir, you would have hardly imagined yourself attending to a young damsel so petrified of your magnificent horse."

Darcy glanced at her askance and raised his brow in challenge. "Only *one* petrified damsel?" he asked dryly. Elizabeth flushed a dark red as she understood his meaning, and silence fell between them.

After a while, she asked tentatively, "How could you tell?"

Darcy smiled ruefully. "If you had seen your own expression when you first mounted Poseidon, you would not be asking me this question." Suddenly he chuckled. "For one moment, I was quite worried that you would jump down the other side, taking with you the tuft of Poseidon's hair that you were clutching so hard! And that would have been a great tragedy for my poor horse is rather proud of his mane."

Despite her chagrin Elizabeth found herself chuckling with him at the absurd imagery he created with his words. When Lady Catherine had invited them to Rosings the day after Mr Darcy's horrible proposal, Elizabeth had dreaded the embarrassment of facing him again. Now she was discovering that fate worked in mysterious ways. The circumstances of their chance encounter today had gone quite a long

way in reducing the awkwardness of meeting him again.

“And here I was congratulating myself for displaying commendable stoicism,” she said wryly.

The comical look she got in response had her chuckling all over again. Suddenly, Millie cried out, and Mr Darcy spent some time shushing her gently. When the little girl had quieted, he cleared his throat and enquired, “If you do not mind, I would like to ask you something, Miss Bennet.”

At her nod, he asked, “Your fear of horses goes much against the image I had of you and I...”

“What image would that be, Mr Darcy?” Curiosity made her interrupt him.

“A feisty woman in complete accord with nature. That is why I was wondering why you are so uncomfortable around horses.”

“We all have our Achilles heel, sir,” she replied ruefully. When she did not add anything else for a while, he imagined that she *did* mind answering his query and fell silent.

“I was about six when I was thrown by the horse I was riding. That I fractured a leg did not scare me as much as the crazed eyes and flailing legs of the horse above me as I lay on the ground cowering. Until today I shudder to think what would have happened had my father not flung himself over me and took the blow meant for me.” She glanced at him and smiled. “As a full-grown person, I can understand that it was the burr under his saddle that made Duke behave in that violent manner. But to a six-year-old child, just the possibility that the animal could go wild like that for any reason whatsoever was a hurdle she could not overcome. A year down the line, I did try to ride once more on papa’s insistence, but somehow my heart was not in it. After a while, he also stopped insisting.”

“Hmm... a terrifying experience by any standards, especially for a small child. I think I can now understand your aversion.”

“I am sorry to have disappointed you, Mr Darcy, that I am not nearly as feisty as you imagined,” Elizabeth said with a wry smile.

“Oh, but I am not all disappointed, Miss Bennet. A woman who could conquer a fear of such longstanding without complaint because circumstances demand it of her is even more spirited than I thought previously.” Elizabeth flushed at the admiring glance he threw her way, not really knowing how to take the compliment.

“Although unsolicited, I would advise you to take up riding once again now that you have finally overcome the mental barrier that impeded you for so long. You never know when the skill would come in handy - like today,” he said, smiling encouragingly at her.

Elizabeth could very well appreciate the good sense in his advice but responded with a forced smile and a noncommittal, “Hmm...”

The reason behind her abrupt change of attitude was a sudden recollection of exactly *whom* she was speaking to. ‘*How could I have forgotten that Mr Darcy holds all my loved ones in utter contempt?*’ she wondered in consternation. But she had felt so comfortable conversing with him today that for a while, she *had* forgotten. She was disconcerted at the sudden reversal in her feelings as the memories of that awful evening came rushing in. His behaviour that day had reminded her why she held him in aversion, but now she was finding it difficult to hold on to that dislike. How could she? When he had come to their rescue so heroically, that too with considerable trouble to himself. More surprisingly, he did not appear to hold a grudge against her, despite how she had rejected his offer so... so cruelly. Yes, she could finally admit to herself that she had been as cruel to him as he had been to her. But whatever the reason for his benevolence, she could not consider it prudent to lower her guard against him, and God forbid, give him an erroneous impression of her feelings! Yet, how could she behave coldly to him now when he had treated them with such consideration. What was she to do? Her confused and disturbed musings suddenly made her conscious of the throbbing in her head, and she grimaced wearily.

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Ever since Darcy had come upon the accident site, he had been

operating almost without conscious thought. He would have done what he had for anyone else in such distress. However, that fact that one of the afflicted was Elizabeth had accorded the incident a special significance. He had never believed in such things, but now he felt convinced that it was *meant* - that he be the one to help her today. Had he not stopped his journey and fallen asleep in that uncharacteristic manner, he would have passed the site of the accident long before it happened. The Almighty, however, had kindly ensured his presence when she needed it, and she had been interacting so naturally with him since then that he had nearly forgotten what lay between them. It was the sudden reserve in her manner that reminded him of her first words when she saw him today. It reminded him that she *disliked* him intensely, that he was the last man... His desperate thoughts were interrupted by a whimper from Millie, and he welcomed the interruption!

He looked down at the fretful child in his arms and concluded that sleep was what she needed. Otherwise, she would continue to get agitated at every nicker that poor Poseidon let out. As he pondered on how to achieve this, he remembered the lullaby he used to croon to his sister Georgie when *she* was a baby. Although it was quite some time since he sang that song, he felt confident that he remembered most of it. *'Millie would hardly be offended if I miss a word here or there,'* he thought wryly.

When the soft crooning of a melodious song flowed in her ears, Elizabeth turned to look at Mr Darcy in surprise. The arresting image the man and the child made brought a lump to her throat, and she looked away hurriedly. Millie's face was nestling in his neck. His head was bent forward slightly as he hummed, his dark hair contrasting sharply with the child's fair ones. To distract herself from the strange feelings coursing through her, she tried to identify the song. Although she failed in her endeavour, the song did manage to work its magic on her.

Darcy was only halfway through the song when a gentle snore fell on his ears. He looked down at the sleeping child and smiled. *'I have not lost my touch even after all these years,'* he thought in amusement and

almost involuntarily glanced askance to share his success with Miss Bennet. He started when he found her swaying lightly on Poseidon's back, her eyes closed. Well, this was not the outcome he had envisaged when he started on the lullaby!

Much though he hated to disturb her, he could not let her take a tumble. He sighed and cleared his throat loudly, "Miss Bennet?"

The speed with which she turned to look at him told him that she had not really dozed off. "Yes, Mr Darcy?" Elizabeth asked, feeling unreasonably disappointed that he had stopped singing, but a look at Millie told her the reason.

"I have been wondering... umm... why you were in that unfortunate carriage? If my memory serves me right, you were to stay almost a fortnight more with your cousin and Mrs Collins?"

Elizabeth sighed as she reflected on what to tell him. For a while, she thought of inventing urgent summons from her uncle that had hurried her journey but soon gave up the idea as unworthy. After all, *she* had done nothing wrong, '*except, maybe blurting out about his proposal to all and sundry,*' she thought uncomfortably. But it was *his* actions that had led to that fracas at Rosings, and he would anyhow get to know the truth soon enough. If she had understood Lady Catherine at all, that lady would be seeking an account of Mr Darcy's version of the events before long. Therefore, she decided to tell him the unvarnished truth. Let him realize the outcome of his heedless conduct!

"Frankly, sir, I had to leave early as my cousin was not prepared to let me stay in his home anymore."

"W... what?" Darcy appeared dumbfounded. "But... why would Mr Collins behave so reprehensibly?" he asked after a moment of shocked silence.

"Because your aunt ordered him to do so," Elizabeth replied enigmatically.

"Excuse me?" Darcy stopped walking and stood staring at her with his mouth hanging open.

Instead of answering, Elizabeth just raised her brow at him in

challenge. Although she felt a little mean for toying with him thus, she firmly believed that he deserved to stew a little after his own less than exemplary conduct.

Poseidon did not stop when Darcy did, and for a few minutes, he stood staring stupidly after a rapidly moving horse and the woman atop him. Then he came out of his stupor and hurried after them. "Surely you jest, Miss Bennet! Why would my aunt do something like that?" he exclaimed as he neared them.

"Because you did not think it appropriate to inform her when you decided to quit Rosings, sir."

If anything, Darcy appeared even more stunned than before and opened and closed his mouth several times without one word leaving him. Taking pity on him, Elizabeth decided to enlighten him finally. "I am not sure why your aunt would come to such a conclusion, Mr Darcy, but when you left Rosings without the courtesy of informing *her*, she somehow got it in her head that you would have shared that information with *me*."

She smiled ruefully when Mr Darcy's eyes widened in disbelief. She added after a moment, "She invited us to tea on the day you left and without much ado asked me to reveal where you had gone. When I expressed my inability to do so, she chose to disbelieve my assertions. After a while, she became further incensed and accused me of ... ahem... using my arts and allurements to trap you into matrimony."

Elizabeth then had to keep quiet for some time as Mr Darcy began to mutter under his breath and continued to do so for several minutes! She could not hear what he was saying, and maybe it was for the best because she was sure she would not have understood half of what he was mumbling!

Once he finished letting off steam, Elizabeth continued, "I swear to you, sir, I was all set to laugh off your aunt's accusations. Unfortunately, my dear cousin just then chose to enlighten us all with his thoughts on immoral hussies who dare to look so far above their station." She raised her brow at him sardonically as she remembered some of *his* lamentations on the fateful day of his proposal.



“Oh, God!” Darcy groaned, looking near ready to tear out his hair.

“Yes.. well... I am sorry to have to tell you, sir, that at that moment, I lost my temper and... and blurted out that far from trying to ensnare you, I had already rejected your proposal.” As Darcy closed his eyes in mortification, Elizabeth found herself apologising to him. “ I am sorry, Mr Darcy, I had no intention of revealing ...”

But he interrupted her in a constricted voice. “No... no. Please do not apologise. I... I think I can understand how that happened.”

“Unfortunately, your aunt was not as understanding. Accusing me of trying to entrap you by telling such tarradiddles, she ordered Mr Collins to throw me out of his home.”

Darcy shook his head disbelievingly. “I do not know what to say, Miss Bennet. I can only thank the good Lord for small mercies - at least my aunt had the decency to give you enough time to make arrangements for your journey.”

“I apologise for disillusioning you further, Mr Darcy, but your aunt asked my cousin to throw me out immediately, and he was more than willing to oblige her.”

For the second time in less than ten minutes, Darcy was left standing with his mouth agape, observing the slowly swaying backsides of his horse and the woman atop him! He again hurried after them and immediately burst out as he drew abreast, “But... then... how did you manage?”

“For that, I have to thank Charlotte and your cousin Miss de Bourgh for their kindness. To put it succinctly, Charlotte arranged for my journey and the intervening stay with Mrs Dawson. While your cousin bullied Mr Collins in keeping mum so that your aunt continues to remain unaware of my extended stay.”

“Bullied?” Darcy couldn’t help but ask.

“Ah... she just reminded my cousin that she was the heir to Rosings.”

“Oh, well done, Anne!” Darcy exclaimed, then fell silent. ‘*No wonder Miss Bennet hates me,*’ he thought in despair. After an awkward silence that lasted for a while, he began, “Miss Bennet, I... ah... I can do

nothing but apologise most profusely. I cannot imagine how my aunt and your cousin could even contemplate acting so reprehensibly. To... to turn out a gently bred woman from home without help or recourse... I do not know how I would have ever forgiven myself if you had come to harm because of the machinations of my family. Please... please do forgive me.”

Until now, Elizabeth herself had been blaming Mr Darcy for what had befallen her. However, as she sat staring at him, it suddenly hit her with a force of a hammer, that by holding him guilty of Lady Catherine’s actions, she was doing to him exactly what he had done to her and Jane – hold them guilty of their family’s conduct! It was very hypocritical of her to do so, and as she gazed into his tormented eyes, she found herself wanting to ease his guilt. “Please do not be uneasy, Mr Darcy. If your aunt acted in a less than exemplary manner, then it was your cousin who ensured that I did not suffer any harm subsequently. Ultimately we all are responsible only for our own conduct. It would not be fair of me to hold you accountable for the actions of others, even if they are your family.”

“You are too kind, Miss Bennet, but I cannot help but dwell on what could have happened had Mrs Collins and my cousin not gathered courage to defy my aunt. I can only lament my hasty conduct now. Had I not left Rosings in a fit of anger that day, none of this would have happened. Although I fail to understand why my aunt should latch on to you...” His voice tapered off as he continued to brood.

Elizabeth nodded thoughtfully. “I have been quite puzzled about that myself. How did your aunt become aware of ... of your... interest when even I was not aware of it...” Elizabeth broke off in confusion as she saw the sudden hurt that flared in his eyes.

“Yes, ironic, isn’t it? That the person I thought I was courting had no inkling of my feelings, and where I believed that I had successfully hidden them, they were perceived so easily. Maybe, Aunt Catherine knows me too well,” he said with a bitter twist to his mouth.

*“Wait, Mr Darcy believes he was courting me all this while? Was that what those all too frequent meetings during my morning rambles were about?”*

*And I have been so foolish as to consider them coincidental! It seems I have allowed my resentment against him to overshadow my reason completely,*' she thought ruefully.

While they both were still contemplating how to break the oppressive silence, the weather came to their rescue, if one could really call it that. The rain that was threatening to come all this while came pelting down as the skies opened up.

Darcy swore and looked up at the sky worriedly, then at the two charges under his care and came to a sudden decision. "Miss Bennet, will you please hold Millie for me?" he asked as he brought Poseidon to a halt.

Although she felt hesitant, Elizabeth nodded and held out her arms. As soon as the little girl was ensconced there, Darcy removed his greatcoat a second time that day. He then carefully wrapped it around the woman and the child and proceeded to button it up securely.

"I am sorry, Miss Bennet, but I will have to ride along with you to speed up our journey to the inn. I cannot take any further risk with your or Millie's health."

Before Elizabeth could make sense of his words, he took Poseidon to a nearby tree stump, climbed behind her and took the reins in his hands - literally and metaphorically. Soon the big beast was trotting along as fast as Darcy could make him in those inclement conditions.

In the beginning, Elizabeth held herself stiffly in an attempt to minimize contact with Mr Darcy. However, she soon realized the futility of the exercise as the sleeping child kept pushing on her from the front. With Millie's comfort in mind, she leaned back with a sigh, her head coming to rest gently under his chin. The sensation of comfort and... reassurance pervading her senses in response to that small action left her feeling quite unnerved.

As Elizabeth leaned into him, Darcy's arms tightened around the precious pair in front of him. His jaw clenched as he understood that had he not made a mull of his proposal, *this* could have been his future! But he had bungled everything so terribly, first in Meryton and then at Rosings, and now Miss Bennet hated him. Bittersweet

emotions assailed him as he realized that this was the closest he would ever come to hold her in his arms. After a while, he shrugged mentally. There was no point in dwelling on the what-ifs. At this moment, his responsibility lay in getting Miss Bennet and little Millie to safety, and that is what he would do.

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Chapter 4

Less than a quarter of an hour later, Darcy dismounted his horse in front of the supposed ‘inn’ and looked at it in some trepidation. While it was going by quite a grandiose name of “The Red Lion”, to Darcy, it appeared more like a small village tavern than an inn where he could procure suitable lodgings for them all. Although the rain had now reduced to a drizzle, he was understandably in a hurry to get Elizabeth and Millie dry and comfortable. The landlord came hurrying out at his call, and Darcy briefly narrated the fix they were in, finishing by stating his requirements. Unfortunately, Jones, the owner of The Red Lion although eager to help, soon confirmed what Darcy had feared.

“I will directly send a cart with some able-bodied men to fetch that poor woman and the coachman, just as you want, sir. I will also offer him a bed when he comes.” The innkeeper then shook his head regretfully. “But I am that sorry, sir, I do not have lodgings fit for you and your lady wife. I have but one room in this establishment, and it is already taken by a weary traveller.”

“Is there any other inn nearby?” Darcy asked although he was not at all hopeful.

“No, sir, but you can try your luck at Mrs Webster’s farmhouse less than a mile away. She has the room for sure. However, I am less confident about your welcome.”

When Darcy raised his brow inquiringly, Jones answered readily enough. “The good lady has recently been having some trouble with strangers and has naturally become leery of them. Although, it is fortunate that you have your family with you. They just might assist in getting Mrs Webster to lower her guard somewhat.” Jones glanced askance at Elizabeth and then sighed. “I do hope that Mrs Webster takes pity on your poor missus, for she is considered quite a magician

in treating the sick and the injured,” he added with a compassionate smile.

Darcy nodded and thanked Jones for the intelligence and his willingness to help with the coachman. Once some coins had changed hands for the innkeeper’s troubles, Darcy hurried back to his newly acquired ‘family’, quite eager to move on and find refuge.

He wanted to confer with Miss Bennet regarding Mrs Webster but decided against troubling her after one look at the shivering woman in front of him. Pain and cold had finally taken their toll, and she was leaning back against him with her eyes closed, an expression of acute misery on her face. With an anxious frown, he urged Poseidon to go faster.

As his faithful horse gathered speed, so did Darcy’s anxious musings. One more concern had started to worry him in addition to the challenge of convincing the eccentric Mrs Webster to offer them sanctuary. Now that they were to stay in someone’s household, the anonymity that an inn in a small, out of the way village would have afforded them was no longer theirs. He was undecided on how to ensure that no stigma was attached to Miss Bennet for travelling alone with an unconnected gentleman.

For a moment, a mischievous inner voice whispered in his ears that he could get his heart’s desire if stigma *did* attach to her name, but he immediately suppressed it with a disgusted huff. A Darcy *did not* stoop to conquer. He also could not forget how her first utterings today had revealed her dislike of him. While his interactions today with Miss Elizabeth had reinforced what he had acknowledged when he quit The Swan - she was there to stay in his heart. Yet, he would never want her to accept him due to compulsion. If she ever agreed to have him, it would be of her own free will.

With a deep sigh, he turned his mind to the problem at hand. If this lady, Mrs Webster, would allow only a family to stay in her home, then maybe *that* was the solution to both of their problems. A young family would be the one seeking shelter from her this evening. To prevent the escape of even a whiff of their identities, he would offer

fictitious names. Darcy, who had always abhorred deceit in any form, was quite disconcerted to realize that for *her*, he was more than prepared to engage in some dissembling of his own!

The rain had stopped by the time he noticed the gate to the farmhouse to his left. In the failing light of the overcast sky, he would surely have missed the gate half-hidden by thick vines had Jones not warned him of that very thing. Mentally thanking the innkeeper for his conscientiousness, Darcy got down from Poseidon to open the gate and led him inside. All the while, he kept his arm protectively around its precious cargo. Only when he had mounted back, with Elizabeth once gain nestling protectively in his arms, did he allow himself to look around. The discerning eyes of the experienced landowner did not miss the few signs of neglect. At a small distance from where they were, the wooden fence bordering the field appeared to be broken. The attempts to repair it were insufficient and amateurish at best. *'Mayhap, Mrs Webster has reasons for her suspicions,'* he mused, his brow furrowed in concern.

A few minutes later, he was dismounting in front of a country house somewhat smaller than he had expected it. He was in the process of picking up Millie and helping Miss Bennet dismount when the front door of the house was flung open. Darcy stopped what he was doing and turned to greet their purportedly reluctant and unwitting hostess. The words of greeting died on his lips at the fantastic image that met his eyes. A tall but slight woman around sixty years of age stood framed in the doorway, pointing a hunting rifle straight at his heart. Disconcerted, he took a step back, his fascinated eyes glued to the hand on the trigger.

"Who are you, and why are you here?" the woman asked belligerently.

He had opened his mouth to answer when an old man came rushing out from behind the house, wielding a pitchfork! Darcy closed his mouth and stared at both the would-be assailants in amused amazement. Had he come harbouring ill-will, it would have been child's play for him to disarm the two. The woman appeared frail, and

the man was sporting a bandage on his right arm. He was still wondering how to appease the ferocious duo when little Millie did that job beautifully by letting out one loud, childish wail.

The rifle was lowered immediately, and the old woman came hurrying forward. "Oh, the poor wee thing! And your wife is injured, young man. What happened to her? By the by, I am Mrs Webster."

Darcy pondered what and how much to tell the old lady as he turned to pick up Millie and help Miss Bennet dismount. '*The Fitzwilliam family it would have to be,*' he thought but changed his mind as soon as his eyes fell on the petulant look on Millie's small face. It reminded him of that very uncompromising "NO HOSS" of just hours ago. Unbidden, an image came to his mind - of their hostess once again pointing her rifle at him after Millie's equally emphatic "NOT PAPA", and he shuddered. It was just his luck that he was surrounded by not one but three unpredictable females! At least with Miss Bennet, he had some hope of her agreeing to the subterfuge, but how could he expect it of the little moppet? There was nothing for it but stick to the truth about Millie and hope that Mrs Webster continued to feel as sympathetic.

"I am Alexander Fitzwilliam, ma'am. We all were for London. While I chose to ride, my wife, our friend Mrs Dawson and her granddaughter Millie were travelling in a carriage. Not too far from here, our carriage suffered an accident in which my wife and the coachman sustained injuries." Darcy waited anxiously for a moment to gauge Miss Bennet's reaction to her sudden plunge into matrimony. When none was forthcoming, he heaved a sigh of relief and continued, "Millie here was more lucky." Fortunately, Mrs Webster was quick to understand what he left unsaid about Mrs Dawson. While her expression turned sympathetic, all she said in response was, "Oh!"

"Yes... well, we came to your village in search of help and lodgings. Jones at The Red Lion was good enough to arrange assistance for our coachman. Unfortunately, he could not offer any accommodation for us. However, he did suggest that we might seek your assistance."

Mrs Webster gave all of them a searching look, then smiled as she

ushered them inside her home. "Please come in. John will stable your horse and bring in your things." Darcy glanced at the man with the pitchfork and was relieved to see that pitchfork was now resting against a nearby wall. He nodded to the man and said, "There is only my valise in the saddlebag. Unfortunately, the rest of our things are still in the carriage. Jones did promise to get them sent to wherever we seek shelter."

Mrs Webster nodded and then addressed John, "Please inform Mr Jones that the Fitzwilliams are staying with us."

"Aye, Missus," John replied as he led Poseidon away.

Darcy followed Elizabeth and Mrs Webster inside that kind lady's home and noticed that she was limping slightly. A fact he seemed to have missed when she came rushing out to meet them.

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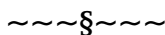
Mrs Webster allocated a room on the first floor for their use. "Martha will show you to your room, Mr Fitzwilliam. Go and get yourself into some dry clothing while I see what I can find for your wife and this little angel."

With a nod and a bow to their hostess, Darcy followed the maid out of Mrs Webster's parlour.

Once the maid had left, Darcy took stock of the room he found himself in. It was a big enough room, with good quality furniture that had started to show signs of age. Although the room was very clean, a musty smell of disuse clung to it.

He noticed that his valise had been placed on a small table near the bed. With a sigh of relief, he went to take out some dry clothes. Banes, an excellent valet by any standards, always kept a set or two of a change of clothes in his master's valise to deal with any eventuality that might befall him. Sure enough, there were two sets of shirts and pants in the valise apart from some other odds and ends for grooming. Fortunately, the dual protection of the saddlebag and the valise had managed to keep everything dry.

As he went about the business of getting himself into blessedly dry clothes, he tried to figure out something that had been preying on him since he had presented Miss Bennet as his wife - their sleeping arrangements. Apart from the question of principles, one more reason he had always stuck to telling the truth was the hassles that came with dissembling, he remembered as he ruefully glanced at the furniture with more purpose than before. In the centre of the room was a four-poster that very fortunately came attached with a truckle bed. The maid had laid out both with fresh linen. *'The truckle bed would do nicely for Millie and the four-poster for Miss Bennet,'* he concluded with some satisfaction as he searched for a place where he could lay his head. He was resigning himself to spend the night in the easy chair placed near the bed when his gaze fell on the couch sitting near the windowsill. *'Ah! This is quite fortunate,'* he muttered to himself. Although his feet would most certainly dangle from one end, the couch would still be more comfortable than a chair. Having achieved a credible solution for one of his major worries, he went down to meet the ladies with a lighter step.



He followed the sound of Millie's sweet voice to the dining room, where everyone seemed to be gathered. For some time, he stood in the doorway unnoticed by the occupants of the room.

Martha and Millie were the first to fall in his line of sight. The moppet was dressed in the clothes of a small boy of her age and still managed to look angelic. The maid was in the process of feeding Millie her supper, which the little girl seemed quite eager to swallow. Either the food was delicious, or the child was really hungry. Darcy smiled at her antics and then turned his attention to the remaining two occupants of the room. As soon as his gaze fell on Miss Bennet, his heart gave an odd flip. She was sitting at the foot of the dining table and was wearing a dress in some shade of dark red. Although the gown appeared more serviceable than fashionable, the colour brought out auburn highlights in her hair which was falling in loose waves over

her shoulders. While he could only see her profile from where he stood, the striking picture she made rendered him breathless. He shook his head to clear his thoughts and directed his attention to what Mrs Webster was doing. Some jars full of salves and other paraphernalia required for medical aid were strewn on the dining table, and the good lady had just finished tying the bandage on Miss Bennet's wound. She looked up as she completed her task and saw him standing in the doorway.

"Come in, Mr Fitzwilliam. You have come down at a most opportune time. Although Elizabeth here is being very brave and is insisting on eating her supper downstairs, anyone with eyes in their head can see that she is all done in. Please take her upstairs, and Martha will bring in your trays in a short while." Darcy brows rose at the informal way Mrs Webster addressed Miss Bennet. The two ladies seemed to be on excellent terms if the manner in which they exchanged smiles was anything to go by. '*Miss Bennet could charm the birds from trees if she were so inclined,*' he thought in amusement.

"Mrs Webster is quite right, my dear. Ah... come, let us go upstairs," he said a little awkwardly as he nodded to Miss Bennet.

She gave him an unreadable look, but to his relief, got up without any comment. Mrs Webster nodded approvingly. "Good girl. You go along with your husband. As promised, I will send you a nourishing broth with some of my special herbs. It will keep away the chill from reaching your lungs and also give you some relief from the pain."

Elizabeth bid their hostess a goodnight and made for the door. It was only then Darcy noticed that the gown she wore was too long for her and trailed behind her as she walked. Maybe that is why she was walking so carefully. Despite that, she tripped before taking too many steps.

"Careful!" he exclaimed as he steadied her.

"Mr Fitzwilliam?" Mrs Webster called out to him.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I believe you did not suffer any injury today as you were riding

alongside the carriage?”

“You are right, Mrs Webster,” Darcy replied, puzzled.

“Then I do not quite understand what is preventing you from picking Elizabeth up and carrying her upstairs? Don’t you think it would be faster and more convenient all around?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Darcy said in a constrained voice and then threw a helpless look at Elizabeth as he bent forward to pick her up in his arms.

“I do not know what is wrong with you young people these days. Had my Simon been alive today, he would have had a few things to say to you about your deplorable lack of chivalry,” Mrs Webster jested.

“I believe you are being too harsh on my dear Alex, ma’am. Don’t you think some concession must be shown to those of advanced age?” Elizabeth smiled impishly at their hostess, who gave a surprised crack of laughter and shook her head.

Darcy did not know whether to be amused or indignant at Miss Bennet’s impudence. Deciding to ignore her outrageous barb about his age, he carried her out of the dining room.

“Alex?” He raised his brow at her as he started climbing the stairs.

“Yes, Mr Alexander Fitzwilliam. Since I found myself married so unceremoniously, I could do nought else but play the doting wife.” Although Elizabeth kept her voice neutral, Darcy could make out that she was not happy with the turn of events.

In the interest of fairness, he tried to explain the compulsions that had started him on the path of this deception. “I am truly sorry, Miss Bennet, that I did not consult you before making claims about our marriage. But the way Mrs Webster welcomed us did not leave me much choice. I can assure you I was guided only by a desire to protect your good name and ensure that Mrs Webster did not refuse us shelter. Jones had mentioned that a family seeking shelter from our hostess might have a better chance of it being offered.”

Elizabeth gave him a searching glance, then sighed, “I... I did hear most of what Mr Jones told you at the inn.”

Darcy was surprised at how easy it had been to convince her of the necessity of the charade. Smiling in relief he said, "I must confess, Miss Bennet, that when I proclaimed us to be married, for a moment, I was deeply worried that you would call me out for the falsehoods I was telling."

In response, she gave him a sardonic glance. "You were quite right to be worried, Mr Darcy. I was almost on the verge of calling you out when my glance fell on the rifle Mrs Webster was still holding, and I suddenly recollected what Mr Jones had said. Frankly, sir, when it came to choosing between being thrown out of this place on our ears and a warm, comfortable bed, I am ashamed to say I chose comfort over candour."

Darcy smiled at her jesting words as he kicked open the door of their room. "Then I can only thank my stars that your intelligence is backed by a strong dose of pragmatism. Otherwise, I do not know where we would be now."

Elizabeth sighed deeply and then added, "To tell you the truth, sir, I am not at all comfortable in repaying our hostess with lies for her kindness. All I can say in my defence is that I was cold and miserable, and my head ached abominably. The very idea of being thrown out from here was insupportable at the time."

Darcy lowered her gently onto the bed. "I told you once that I abhor deceit of any kind but today I could do nothing else than what I chose, for the reasons I already shared." He looked into her eyes as he spoke, willing her to understand.

The intensity in his eyes made her catch her breath, and as she stared at him, his face so near her own, she felt a strong frisson of attraction. *'What are you about, Elizabeth! How could you be attracted to... to Mr Darcy! This man ruined your sister's happiness and cheated his childhood friend out of his inheritance,'* she thought, exasperated with herself. *'But how could a man who would walk miles to assist an orphaned little girl and a woman who spurned him be anything but good and kind?'* another voice whispered in her ears. She was already frustrated with her inability to overcome her confusions, and now these strange emotions

that his nearness engendered in her left her totally unnerved.

“I would like to rest for a while,” she told him shortly as she closed her eyes, willing him to move away and leave her in peace.

“Of course, Miss Bennet,” came the quiet response. In the next instance, she heard a whispered sound and felt the duvet being arranged around her gently. Then he moved away as she had wanted, but she could still feel his presence with every fibre of her being.

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Chapter 5

Darcy slowly walked away from the bed and, with a deep sigh, sat down in a nearby chair. *'She has withdrawn from me once again,'* he thought with an ache in his heart. However, he could not really blame her for her reactions. She had been through a lot in the last few days culminating in that accident, and most of it had been at his hands or those of his relatives. Add to this the fact that she disliked him, and it was a miracle that she had interacted with him today in such a civil fashion. But then, she always was gracious and treated even the likes of Caroline Bingley with punctilious civility. Only once had he seen her completely out of temper and unable to control her emotions - the day he had proposed.

'How had things come to such a pass...' His troubled musings were interrupted by a knock at the door. When he bade enter, Martha came in carrying their trays. Believing Elizabeth to be asleep, she arranged everything on the table very quietly and then addressed Darcy in a low voice, "The mistress asked to tell you to enjoy your meal in peace. I will in bring the little Miss when you have eaten your supper." At Darcy's nod of thanks, she left the chamber with a quick curtsy.

"Miss Bennet, our supper is here," he said. When he did not get a response, he called out again in a much louder voice, "Miss Bennet?"

"I do so wish that you would let me be, Mr Darcy. I do not want any supper. I only want to sleep," was the testy response he received for his pains.

Darcy shook his head. From what he knew of the stubborn woman, cajoling was hardly going to work with her, especially when she sounded so peeved, but then he also knew that she hardly ever refused a challenge. *'Ah well, you leave me no choice, Miss Bennet,'* he muttered to himself.

“You know, today, I was delighted to learn that I still remember the lullaby I used to sing to my sister when she was little. There was something else I enjoyed a lot at that time.” He paused for effect, and the subject of his speech was so arbitrary that despite herself, Elizabeth found herself curious to discover what he would say next.

“I also loved to feed Georgie her favourite chicken broth whenever my baby sister threw a tantrum and refused her food.” Not understanding where he was taking the conversation, a puzzled Elizabeth waited in suspense. She did not have to wait for long.

“So... Er... if you do not get up soon and finish your supper, I believe I would be quite keen to discover if I still possess the knack to get recalcitrant young ladies to swallow their food.”

“Wait! Did he just threaten to... to force the food on me? How dare he?” Elizabeth sat up with a jerk and glared at him. That the sudden movement made her head ache some more did not improve her mood. “You would not dare, Mr Darcy!” she said sharply.

“I truly hope that you would not put my resolve to test, Miss Bennet.”

When Elizabeth let out an outraged gasp at that, Darcy offered her a rueful smile and added, “But now that I have your undivided attention, I would like you to recall that Mrs Webster was going to put some special herbs in your broth - to keep away the chill. As such, this broth here is more medicine than supper, and I am sure you will find it delicious if you but give it a chance.”

Elizabeth made to speak, but he spread his hand placatingly and added, “Don’t you think it is in your interest to get better as soon as possible so that we can commence our journey homewards at the earliest opportunity?”

Elizabeth wanted to rail at him for his impudence but, what he said just now made so much sense that she found she was quite unable to do so. However, she could not prevent herself from responding with a petulant – “Oh, very well. I will eat if you pass that tray to me.”

“Excellent!” Darcy smiled at her as he picked up the tray and placed it carefully on her lap. Then with a murmured “Bon appétit, Miss

Bennet,” he went to pick up his tray and sat down to enjoy his meal.

Elizabeth warily raised the spoon to her mouth and tasted the broth – it really was delicious! She swallowed the bite with a smile of pleasure and inadvertently glanced at Mr Darcy. It appeared that he had been observing her and looked away quickly when she glanced his way, but not before she noticed the smug amusement in his eyes! All her earlier irritation with him returned in full force. Controlling her temper with difficulty, she asked him sweetly, “Do you know what kind of persons annoy me the most, Mr Darcy?”

“I really can’t say Miss Bennet, but I am sure you will enlighten me before long,” he replied with a quirk to his lips.

“Well, since you insist, I can safely tell you that the smug know it all, who believe that they are always right are the ones I find most annoying.” She smiled innocently.

“Of course, I quite understand.” Darcy nodded sagely, but Elizabeth was further incensed to see a shadow of amusement reflect on his face once again.

For one mad moment, she thought about getting up and dumping the contents of her bowl in his lap. Just as if he had read her mind, he asked, “I do hope that you do not contemplate violence against such pesky people.”

“I have not been known to do so, sir.”

“I must say that relieves my mind greatly.”

For a while, there was silence as both applied themselves to their meal. “But then there is always a first time for everything,” she added, almost as an afterthought.

“I... I thank you for the word of caution.” Despite his best efforts, Darcy’s voice shook slightly.

‘The odious man is laughing at me!’ With an irritated huff, Elizabeth dipped her spoon in the bowl. To her acute embarrassment, a discordant sound was the outcome when the spoon scraped against the bottom of the bowl. She had nearly emptied the bowl in such a short while! The irritating Mr Darcy would be feeling quite pleased

with himself, she thought in annoyance but immediately felt ashamed of her uncharitable thoughts. *‘He was only trying to help you get better, Elizabeth!’* chided a voice in her head. *‘But did he have to be so brazen about it? Forcing food on recalcitrant young ladies, indeed!’* came back another peskier one. *‘As if you were going to relent had he continued to coax you to partake the broth?’* asked the saner one sarcastically. Feeling uncomfortable, Elizabeth recollected her earlier resolve to ignore Mr Darcy. In all probability, she would have carried her plan through had he not annoyed her into a dialogue. *‘Mr Darcy appears to know me much better than I had presumed!’* Shaking her head at the troubling direction her thoughts were taking, she decided to distract herself.

“Mr Darcy?”

“Yes, Miss Bennet?” Darcy asked as he dabbed at his lips with the napkin, then placed it and the empty tray on the nearby table.

‘I have been meaning to ask you... how did it happen that you were at the site of the accident to rescue us so expediently? Were you on your way to Rosings once again?’

For a moment, Darcy froze, not knowing how to answer the awkward question coming at him so suddenly. He could hardly tell her that her rejection had sent him on a drunken spree! That for two days, he had hidden himself in a wayside inn, imbibed more than what was good for him and licked the invisible but very real wounds to his heart.

“Ah.. not really. I felt somewhat indisposed soon after I left Rosings three days ago and therefore decided to break my journey at The Swan.” *‘Afterall, one is indisposed when one is inebriated, isn’t one?’*

“Oh! I hope you are completely recovered now,” Elizabeth asked in concern.

“Yes, Miss Bennet, it was only today that I felt well enough to resume my journey to London.”

Elizabeth nodded in response as her thoughts dwelt on the strange quirks of fate. Had Mr Darcy not felt indisposed that day, he would not have been travelling to London today and could not have come to

their rescue. She shivered as she pondered on what could have happened had he not been there for them all.

Darcy went up to the bed and removed Elizabeth's empty tray as well. When his gaze fell on her troubled visage, he mistook the cause of her disquiet. For a moment, he stood undecided, suddenly feeling all the awkwardness of their position. *'Miss Bennet must be desirous of some privacy before she retired for the night,'* he concluded and decided to relieve her of his presence directly.

"Miss Bennet?"

When she looked at him inquiringly, he said, "I think you should take some rest now. I am going down for a while to check how Poseidon has settled in. So, I will bid you good night." Then with a quick, correct bow, he hurried out of the room.

While Darcy had made a mistake in interpreting her expressions, Elizabeth had interpreted his actions quite accurately. *'Ah, Mr Darcy, ever the correct gentleman is leaving me in peace to perform my nightly ablutions,'* she thought in amusement as she saw him escaping their room like a startled rabbit.

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Her amusement soon turned to impatience when she tried to get up from the bed and was immediately struck by an attack of dizziness that left her feeling helpless. *'What an inconsiderate man! Could he not enquire if I needed any help before disappearing so precipitately?'* she thought irritably, conveniently forgetting that she would rather have died than ask him to assist her to a chamber pot! *'Well, the world is full of thoughtless people, but I am more than capable enough to make do on my own,'* she thought rather virtuously, if unfairly, and made another attempt to rise. Unfortunately, with the exact same result as before. *'What am I to do? Would I really need to seek his assistance for...'* Her mind shied away from the thought. As if on cue, Martha came inside the room after a knock at the door. She was carrying a sleeping Millie in her arms.

‘Oh, thank the good Lord!’ Elizabeth thought, much relieved.

After carefully lowering the child onto the truckle bed, Martha turned to address her with a smile, “Mr Fitzwilliam said you might have some need of me, missus.”

“Really! Did that man have to be so perfect?” Elizabeth muttered to herself as another wave of highly unreasonable annoyance struck her. It seemed poor Darcy could do nothing right where one Miss Elizabeth Bennet was concerned. She did not comprehend that this uncharacteristic petulance was due to her brain desperately trying to sever the threads of esteem slowly winding around her heart. Esteem for a man she could not bear the sight of a few hours ago!

Setting aside her irritation, she conveyed her need to Martha, who readily came forward to help her. “I hope Millie did not trouble you any more than was necessary?” she asked the maid when that kind woman was assisting her back to the bed.

“Oh, no, the little miss was very good,” Martha replied, then added with a smile, “Only these unfamiliar clothes caused her some irritation. She did tell me a few times to get a pink dress for her.”

“Ah, yes, Millie’s favourite dress,” Elizabeth smiled fondly at the sleeping child.

“Oh! Now I understand,” Martha grinned as she cosily tucked in Millie and then took her leave of Elizabeth.

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When Darcy entered the room after his foray to the stables, he was relieved to find both Miss Bennet and Millie sound asleep. As quietly as he could, he picked up a pillow and blanket from the bed, the candle from the table and retired to his chosen corner. Soon, he was sorely missing his valet’s efficient presence as he encountered some difficulty while removing his shoes. Suddenly, it struck him that Georgie and his staff at Darcy house would greatly worry when he failed to turn up as expected. ‘*It completely slipped my mind to send a message to them!*’ he thought in consternation. Then decided to get

Jones at The Red Lion to send out an express rider with a letter for his butler Higgins early tomorrow morning.

He sighed in relief when he finally managed to rid himself of his shoes. Snuffing out the candle, he settled for the night. However, sleep did not come easily, as he continued to puzzle over something he had observed downstairs. When he had gone to the stables, he had met John and his young grandson, a child of about ten. They were coming out from a tiny cottage situated right behind the farmhouse and quite strangely were carrying blankets with them. They reached the stables at the same time as him. Although John had remained courteous throughout, he had not really been welcoming when he had enquired after the reason for Darcy's presence there. On being apprised of it, the old man had accompanied him to Poseidon's stall. From what Darcy had been able to observe in the near dark, there were four stalls in the stable block. Poseidon was in the first stall. The one next to him was occupied by what appeared to him to be a Shetland pony. Then there was an empty stall, and again the last one appeared to be occupied. Although Darcy had not gone any further than the first stall, his knowledgeable eyes had got an impression of a magnificent beast quite out of place in the Webster's stables. Feeling a little uncomfortable for what he felt were his snobbish thoughts, he had left soon after patting Poseidon's neck comfortingly one last time.

Since he had wanted to provide Miss Bennet enough time to retire before his return, he had spent quite a while strolling outside. All that time, John and his grandson had remained in the stables. It appeared they were going to spend the night in the lofts above the stable block. Now, as he shifted on the couch to attain a more comfortable position, the incongruity of their conduct struck him forcibly. *'Why were the old man and the boy spending their night in such an uncomfortable manner when they had a fine cottage for their use?'* There definitely was some difficulty that these good people were facing. He would like to help... but...how would he know what the problem was? For all the civility he had shown Darcy, John did not appear to trust him, and Darcy could not blame him for that. *'Somehow, I will find out.'* On that resolve, Darcy fell asleep for the first time that night.

He did not know what it was that disturbed his sleep, but all of a sudden, he found himself wide awake. The room felt chilly, and as he sat up, his gaze swivelled towards the fireplace. The fire was on the point of dying out, and the immediate necessity was to replenish it. He shifted aside the window curtain, and the moonlight that came pouring in made it a lot easier for him to negotiate his way around. He picked up the candle from the windowsill and made his way to the fireplace. The coal scuttle was full, thankfully. After lighting the candle, he went about replenishing the fire, and it was not many minutes later that a roaring fire was going again. He had just straightened up, feeling the glow of a task well accomplished in addition to that of the fire, when he heard it - a soft moan. Feeling concerned that little Millie might be having a nightmare, he went up to the truckle bed. To his surprise, the child was sleeping peacefully. He then looked towards Miss Bennet and was shocked to observe that she was shivering quite violently. As he stood transfixed, she gave another soft moan that brought him out of his stupor, and he hurriedly made his way to her.

“Miss Bennet?” He called and placed a hand gingerly on her forehead - it was burning hot! She was running a high fever. For a moment, he felt at a loss on what to do. Fortunately, he soon remembered that when he had met Mrs Webster after supper, she had informed him that Martha would be leaving some powders in their room for just such a contingency. He looked at the bedside table and was relieved to find a small jar next to the water jug. The kind lady had even sent instructions on a paper! Blessing her for her kindness, he quickly mixed the powder as required. ‘*Now, how to administer the medicine?*’ he wondered as he worriedly looked down at the shivering, insensible woman on the bed.

“Miss Bennet?” He called again but received only a moaning sound in response. With a sigh, he sat down next to her. Gently raising her head onto his arm, he spooned the medicine into her mouth. The task was rendered difficult as she continued to shiver and some of the liquid spilt out. Once he believed that he had given her a sufficient quantity, he lowered her back to the bed.

Since the shivering did not show any sign of abating, he looked about for another blanket. The chest that was conveniently placed next to the bed was most inconveniently lacking in any more bed linen! So, he brought his own blanket and wrapped it cosily around her. He then shifted the easy chair nearer to the bed and sat down to wait. Nearly half an hour later, the only thing that had happened was that *he* had started to feel quite chilled. Greatly missing his greatcoat that Martha had taken away to dry out, he got up to check on Miss Bennet. He pursed his lips worriedly when he found that her fever was still as high, the shivering as violent, and her hands as cold as ice. Feeling helpless, he chafed at her hands to transfer some warmth and pondered on what to do. The only solution that he came up with made him very uncomfortable. How much ever he tried telling himself that he was doing it for her wellbeing, it still left him feeling as if he was taking advantage of an unconscious woman. Gritting his teeth, he slipped inside the covers and lay beside her tensely, feeling almost afraid to breathe.

Five minutes later, the covers felt as hot as the fireplace he had tended sometime back, and he warily turned his head to peek at Miss Bennet. He did not know if it was wishful thinking on his part, but the intensity of her shivers seemed to have reduced. He closed his eyes on a relieved sigh and relaxed a little. The next instant, his body froze, and his eyes popped open. Instinctively gravitating towards the source of the very welcome warmth in the covers, Elizabeth had suddenly wrapped herself in his arms. As her face came to rest in the crook of his neck, a multitude of emotions rushed through him, and his heart felt full - almost to bursting. The emotions roiling through him were a strange mixture of protectiveness, affection, warmth, pleasure, and to his deep discomfort, a sharp sliver of... desire that he tried to tamp down ruthlessly. *'For heaven's sake, Darcy, she is ill and nearly unconscious!'* he told himself angrily even as his body adjusted to accommodate hers, and his arm held her more securely to him. He once again closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but that was impossible at the moment. The emotions that had nearly assaulted him with their ferocity just now had made him come to a decision. He could not let

her go - without at least trying to gain her heart all over again. This time with humility instead of arrogance.

‘But what can I do to change her impression of me?’ he thought anxiously, as he remembered the vehemence with which she had rejected his suit only a few days ago. On that day, she had laid two main charges against him that he had already attempted to answer in his letter. *‘Shall I give the letter to her?’* That seemed to be the obvious starting step, he decided, but then, to his horror, he recollected how angry he had been when he had begun that letter! How insultingly he had referred to all her family in it. No, sharing that letter was out of the question! Thinking about families also reminded him how gracious she had been to him today in the matter of less than pleasant family members! How charitably she had refused to blame him for the actions of his aunt when she had all the reasons to do so, and he groaned aloud in frustration! He had not shown the generosity of heart while loving her that she had shown while disliking him!

“Oh, Elizabeth!” he whispered and brushed his lips against her forehead. “I will do better this time, sweetheart, I promise.” On that fierce resolve, Darcy fell asleep for the second time that night.

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## Chapter 6

The next morning when Darcy woke up, he found his gaze resting on Elizabeth sleeping peacefully beside him, and a feeling of utter contentment stole over him. She was the most beautiful sight in the world to him, despite the bandage on her head and the blue shadows under her eyes! For a long while, he lay there simply gazing at her and smiling foolishly. Slowly, the recollection of the happenings of last night seeped into his consciousness, and he stretched out a hand to her forehead. Although she still felt warm to the touch, the fever appeared to have broken. "Thank God!" he muttered as he brushed the hair gently away from her forehead. Then immediately froze when she moved her head restlessly with a few mumbled words.

It was then that the reality of their situation came crashing in on him - that however respectable his actions and intentions, he was in bed with an unmarried woman. A woman, who, if she saw him now, would first break his head and ask any questions later! The alacrity with which he leapt out of the bed, thumped his pillow into shape, and lastly folded his blanket, was to be seen to be believed! He paused to take a breath when he was at a respectable distance from the bed. It was only when he stood looking down at a still sleeping Elizabeth and a slowly stirring Millie from his new position that he had the time to analyse his actions and laugh at them. '*You truly are in dire straits, Darcy!*' He chuckled to himself as he made his way to the washstand behind the screen. But he already had a challenge on his hands in trying to change Elizabeth's mind about himself. No one could blame him if he had no desire to make his task more difficult by fostering any further misunderstandings between them!

Less than a quarter of an hour later, he presented himself for breakfast downstairs. He found Mrs Webster already in the process of finishing hers, and he had worried that he might be disturbing their routine by turning up so early! He should have known; it was a farmer's house, after all.

"Good morning, Mrs Webster," he greeted the old lady and went to get a plate for himself.

"Good morning, Mr Fitzwilliam. How is Elizabeth today?" Mrs Webster enquired as he seated himself across from her.

"She is well and sleeping peacefully at the moment. You must allow me to thank you for all the care you have shown us, ma'am. Last night Elizabeth had a high fever, but a single dose of that miraculous powder you had sent was very effective in bringing it down."

Mrs Webster smiled happily. "There is no need to thank me, Mr Fitzwilliam. I am glad that I could be of service."

"Then I can only thank our good fortune that we found our way to you yesterday," Darcy replied, meaning every word.

There was silence for a while, then Mrs Webster asked after Millie. "I hope that sweet child had a peaceful night. I was quite worried that she might ask for her grandmother in the night the way she did before falling asleep."

Darcy shook his head sombrely. "Fortunately, she slept through the night. It is only now that she has started to stir a little."

Mrs Webster nodded, then called out to Martha, "Please go and check on the little one, Martha. We do not want her disturbing Elizabeth just yet."

"You appear to be in somewhat of a hurry, Mr Fitzwilliam," Mrs Webster said in amusement as she saw Darcy applying himself to his breakfast with a single-minded determination.

Darcy gave her a sheepish look, then smiled. "You are right, madam. I *am* in a hurry to reach The Red Lion and get Jones to send an express rider to my staff in London. I totally forgot to send a message to them yesterday, and they would all be very worried by now."

“Oh, of course. Now, I understand your impatience.” Mrs Webster nodded then continued, “I will ask John to accompany you in our pony cart. He can help you get your things back here that much faster.”

“I thank you, Mrs Webster. I am sure both the ladies upstairs would be very pleased to get back into their own raiment.”

“Hmm... I do not know about Elizabeth, but little Millie is very impatient for a pink dress,” Mrs Webster replied with a grin.

Darcy smiled at her jest, then rose to excuse himself. At the door, he turned to address their hostess once again, “Ah... Mrs Webster, do you think an apothecary should take a look at Elizabeth?” He asked hesitantly, then hurried to add, “Please do not think that I at all doubt your expertise. It is just that she suffered an injury to her head and...”

Mrs Webster started nodding before he could complete his thoughts. “I can appreciate your concern, Mr Fitzwilliam. Although *I* believe that your wife is on the mend, I also know that injuries to the head can be quite unpredictable. Frankly, it would also relieve me of a worry if our local apothecary, Mr Talbot, could confirm my prognosis. You may ask John to show you the way to Mr Talbot’s house whenever you decide to visit him.”

Darcy smiled in relief that Mrs Webster had not taken umbrage at his suggestion and took his leave of the good lady with an easy mind.

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A few minutes later, Darcy rode out of the stables after asking John to follow him to The Red Lion in his pony cart. When he arrived at the inn, he found Smith standing outside, speaking to a burly looking man, who appeared to be some kind of a workman from his clothes. ‘*Maybe it is the blacksmith. Smith would be keen to get his carriage repaired at the earliest,*’ he thought as he handed over the reins of Poseidon to the boy who came to lead him away.

“I would need about three days to repair that broken pile. If I start working on it this morning, then the earliest I can hand over the

carriage to you is around noon of the day after the morrow..." the burly man was saying when Darcy made his way towards the two men. "And let me warn you, it will cost you a pretty penny," the man added for good measure.

"How much?" Smith asked hesitantly. On hearing the answer, his face lost whatever colour it had. It was evident to any observant person that the poor man did not have sufficient money for the extensive repair work. Darcy, who had been meaning to ask his butler to send one of his carriages to transport them back to London, realized that a change of plans was imminent. *'And maybe it was for the best,'* he thought with a sigh. He did not know when Miss Bennet would be fit to travel, and he also needed time to figure out what was troubling Mrs Webster. It was then quite convenient that he had a suitable justification for spending a day or two more at Mrs Webster's.

"I do not..." Smith had begun when Darcy interrupted him.

"How are you, Smith? I hope your shoulder is not troubling you anymore."

Smith doffed his cap. "I am well, sir, as is my shoulder," he replied with a wan smile, not entirely unhappy at being interrupted.

"So, when do you expect your carriage to be ready for our journey back to London?"

For a moment, the coachman appeared flummoxed, then he rallied. "Cooper here says he could repair it by the day after the morrow. But... I... I am yet to arrange for the ready^[iii] and... and Cooper needs half of the payment upfront to start the repairs. So... I am sorry, sir, but I really cannot say when the carriage would be fit for travel. It would be best if you look for some other means for your journey."

"How much?" Darcy asked the man being referred to as Cooper.

On receiving the same answer that had so thoroughly disconcerted the poor coachman only a few moments ago, Darcy offered a coin to the man and said, "I am hoping that you will deliver the carriage when you promised."

Mr Cooper pocketed the coin and smiled beatifically. "Do not worry,

Guv, Cooper always keeps his word,” he added rather grandly, and with, “I will get on with it then,” he took his leave.

Smith, who had been watching the exchange in stunned silence, got back his voice then and exclaimed, “But, I really cannot take the money from you, sir!”

Darcy raised his brow at him and said dryly, “I am sorry if you got the impression that I had *given* that money to you. It is a loan, my good man. A loan that I have offered in expectation of the service I require from you, and one that I fully expect you to pay me back within six months.”

Smith stared at Darcy for a long while, finding it difficult to express his feelings. Swallowing hard, he finally came up with a weak jest, “Then I will be reading the contract very carefully, sir.”

“That is always a sound practice.” Darcy smiled at him and added, “I’ll bid you a good day then, and do send a word when the carriage is ready.”

He started to go inside the inn but stopped when Smith called out to him, “Sir?”

Darcy turned to face him and was surprised to observe the sudden change in the man’s countenance. He was mangling the cap in his hand and appeared embarrassed and uncomfortable.

“Yes?”

“Ah... Mr Jones told me that you and... and your family are staying with a Mrs Webster.” The man stopped speaking and visibly gulped. Then straightened himself to look directly into Darcy’s eyes and continued, “But I know that Miss Bennet is... is not married. So, I... I want to know if she and the little one are well?” Although the man spoke softly so as not to be overheard, there was determination in his voice even if he could not make himself clearly articulate his uneasiness.

His strength of character impressed Darcy. It also pleased him to acknowledge that Smith was trying to protect Elizabeth and Millie - despite the extreme disparity of power existing between him and

Darcy. Although the coachman was now dependent on him for the repair work on his carriage, he had dared to question him. The man deserved to be taken into his confidence, Darcy concluded. To both their surprise, he found himself spilling out his feelings to a stranger - a coachman at that!

“Had Miss Bennet accepted my hand when I asked her, you would have met her today as my betrothed, or more probably, you would not have met her at all. Unfortunately, I bungled things and was refused...” Darcy paused and looked at Smith, who was staring at him in wide-eyed amazement. He could not decide whether the coachman was shocked at the tale being told to him, or at the fact that it was being told at all! Shaking his head at the absurd situation, he forced himself to continue, “And while I still remain desirous of the connection, I have no intention of forcing her hand. But considering how fragile a lady’s reputation is in our society, that is what would have happened had I introduced her here in Bassingtonstoke as herself. That is why when Jones assumed that Millie and Miss Bennet were my family, not only did I not contradict him but decided to go along with the suggestion. I can assure you that she and Millie both are well and...” Darcy gave him a sardonic smile, “Not being forced to do anything against their will.”

Smith continued to stare at him for a long searching moment, then smiled. “Then all I can do is wish you luck, Mr... *Fitzwilliam*.”

The strange manner in which Smith addressed him suddenly made Darcy recollect that he had already introduced himself to the coachman when he reset his shoulder yesterday. The man knew his true identity! However, it now appeared that Smith had decided to trust him and go along with their subterfuge. He nodded in relief and parted with the coachman with a heartfelt, “Thank you, Smith. I definitely need it.

While entering the inn, he noticed that John had arrived and even now was overseeing the transfer of the luggage to his cart. ‘*Good. We would be free to visit Mr Talbot and the vicar as soon as I have finished writing the letter for Higgins,*’ he thought as he went inside the inn.

It was nearly noon when Darcy reached the farmhouse after finishing all the chores he had assigned himself. It was much later than he had expected to be away. The delay occurred because of what he had found when he reached the vicarage, and not a moment too soon! He had gone there to discuss the funeral arrangements of Mrs Dawson with the vicar. But when he reached there, he was shocked to find the said gentleman in the process to begin officiating over a pauper's funeral for the poor lady, complete with a common grave! The 'able-bodied' men that Jones had sent for the rescue had somehow not been very able in communicating the situation, and the vicar had understood the lady to be alone and unclaimed! It had taken Darcy all this time to get things sorted out.

Now, as he entered the house, he decided to carry Millie's small trunk with him. The lonely funeral that he had attended with only the vicar, John and himself as attendees had left him with a strange sadness. His heart ached for the innocent child who had suffered a loss she was too young to comprehend. He brought in the trunk with the hope that Millie would be pleased to see her things!

In the parlour, he found Mrs Webster busy with an account book and Millie was seated near her playing with some old wooden toys. While he had been gone, Martha appeared to have dressed the child back into her own clothes from yesterday. The old lady looked up as Darcy entered the room, "Ah, you are back, Mr Fitzwilliam - much later than I expected you. I hope you were successful in your endeavours?"

"Yes, ma'am, I accomplished all that I had wanted. Mr Talbot had a few patients with him when I visited. He has promised to attend us here within an hour."

Mrs Webster nodded in satisfaction. "That is good. Elizabeth had woken up soon after you went out. After breakfast, she elected to sit near the window and enjoy the beauty of our humble garden. Unfortunately, the aftereffects of yesterday's accident soon made themselves felt, and I believe she is resting now."

Before Darcy could react to this piece of information, Millie came toddling up to him and chirped happily after one look at her small trunk, “Dolly! Millie’s dolly!”

Darcy smiled at the child’s unadulterated pleasure, then addressed Mrs Webster, “Well, ma’am, pink dress or no, the poppet does seem happy to see her things. I will take her to the room and see if I can unite her with this... er... dolly.”

Mrs Webster waved them off with a smile.

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When he entered the room with an excited Millie trailing behind, he found that Elizabeth was indeed sleeping. Miming the child to keep quiet, he placed the trunk on a table and opened it. The meagre number of dresses, along with a few tattered toys that were inside, again pricked at his heart. He was trying to find the all-important dolly when he felt a tug at his right hand. The child was too excited to wait patiently and indicated that she be picked up! Darcy complied with a grin. Immediately dolly was identified as a doll made of cloth, wearing a faded red dress and hair that had been golden at some point in time. Once she had the doll in her hand, Millie’s eyes fell on that much talked about pink dress. This led to a battle of wills between the child and the man.

“Millie’s pink dress!” He was informed.

“Ah, yes, it is very pretty, just like Millie,” Darcy replied with a smile.

“Millie want.” With a sigh, he picked the dress and handed it to the child.

“Put on,” came the imperious demand next.

“But you are already wearing such a beautiful green dress.” Darcy tried his hand at some flattery, unsuccessfully.

“Millie want pink dress!” There was no softening of expression.

“Very well, poppet. When Martha comes here, we will ask her to change your dress,” he hedged.



“Na...ow!” came the whispered but adamant response. Unfortunately, it was followed by a trembling in her lower lip, and the violet eyes started shimmering with unshed tears. The already unequal battle was thus lost very precipitately. Darcy tried telling himself that he did not want Millie to throw a tantrum and disturb Miss Bennet, but the truth was that for some reason, the child tugged at his heartstrings, and he found it difficult to say no to her.

With a deep sigh, he sat down in the easy chair and took the dress from her. “All right, my girl, let us get you into the pink dress,” he said as he lowered the child to the floor.

When he unfolded the dress, a pink ribbon fell from it. With a joyful cry of, “Wibbon!” Millie bent to pick it up.

A few minutes later, the little girl was finally garbed in her favourite dress. She laughed and twirled around happily. Darcy also chuckled along with her and sat back with a relieved sigh. Alas, too soon!

“Wibbon.” The child offered it to him. Darcy smilingly shook his head and said, “You keep it with you, child.”

In response, he was offered an exasperated look and the ribbon once again. “Put wibbon in Millie’s hair.”

If anything, Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley was a quick learner. Immediately realising the futility of starting an argument, he took the proffered ribbon and turned the child around. Martha had neatly dressed Millie’s hair in a single braid and threaded it with a green ribbon. Trying the quick and the efficient approach, he swiftly knotted the pink ribbon on top of the green one.

“Done.” He smiled at Millie in relief. The child gave him a suspicious look, caught hold of her braid and inspected it. The look of extreme disappointment he was given after the inspection made him feel as insignificant as an insect on the ground.

“Only... pink... wibbon,” he was told slowly and clearly and then presented with the child’s back once again.

*‘Exchanging one ribbon for another should not be such a difficult endeavour,’* he mumbled as he gingerly loosened the offending green

one. Unfortunately, his fingers felt like thumbs around the unfamiliar task, and a few of the knots from the braid came loose before he could tie it again with the replacement. Swearing under his breath, he desperately applied himself to recapture the pattern.

That was the reason when Miss Elizabeth Bennet woke up for the second time that day, her eyes were subjected to such an unusual vision that she closed them once again on the assumption that the injury to her head was making her see illusions! After all, it really could not be that Mr Darcy was sitting in an easy chair at the foot of her bed, expertly braiding Millie's hair, with a pink ribbon dangling from the pocket of his coat! Taking a few deep breaths, she counted to ten. Then she carefully reopened her eyes, but the vision had not disappeared. Although, there were some subtle changes in the image. The braiding was complete, and instead of dangling from his coat, the ribbon was now being threaded through the braid. As she continued to stare in bemusement, the task was soon accomplished.

"It is truly done now, poppet," Mr Darcy said with a relieved smile. By way of response, Millie inspected her braid and then smiled delightedly at the man. "Done," she repeated, then kissed Mr Darcy smack on his cheek, who smiled widely in return.

The enchanting exchange warmed Elizabeth's heart, and she too lay there smiling until a nagging thought entered her head. Mr Darcy appeared entirely too proficient in braiding a woman's hair. It was quite a strange 'talent' for a man to have! *'Where had he learnt it and why? With whom? Was he like any other dissolute man of the nobility?'* Strangely till now, she had always thought him to be quite cold and fastidious. *'But what could one really know about someone from afar?'* she mused. Somehow the thought that Mr Darcy was a man of loose morals disturbed her greatly. Why should she be worried about the morals of a man she had rejected so categorically only days ago was a question she shied away from. She must have made some movement because Millie turned to look at her suddenly.

"Beth!" she cried and came hurrying towards her. "Look! Pink dress," she said and twirled around.

“Yes, sweetheart. It is very beautiful.” Elizabeth smiled at her. Satisfied, Millie skipped away to play with her dolly.

“How are you feeling, Miss Bennet? I hope we did not disturb your rest.”

“Not at all, Mr Darcy. I have had sufficient rest and am feeling quite well at present.” There was a moment’s awkward silence which Elizabeth hurried to break. “You went out quite early this morning?”

“Yes, I wanted to send a message to my staff explaining my absence. I also wanted to request the apothecary to come and examine you.”

“Oh, but what is the need for an apothecary? I already feel quite well and believe Mrs Webster’s treatment to be quite sufficient. If an apothecary visits here, she might feel upset that...”

“Please do not worry, Miss Bennet. It was Mrs Webster who said that head injuries can be unpredictable and that it will relieve her mind if Mr Talbot confirms her diagnosis.”

“Oh! In that case...” Elizabeth shrugged, giving up the argument.

“We also bought your things from the Red Lion. In case you want something from your trunk, you can now ask Martha. As you can see, Millie here has already donned her favourite dress,” Darcy said and wondered if *she* also had a favourite gown. If he remembered correctly, she did favour a bright yellow gown both in Meryton and at Rosings. The gown did suit her very well, and her eyes appeared more luminous than ever when she put it on. His pleasant musings were interrupted by Elizabeth clearing her throat.

“I think you would make a very efficient abigail<sup>[iii]</sup>, Mr Darcy. I saw how expertly you braided Millie’s hair.” Unfortunately, the disturbing thought had continued to nag at Elizabeth.

“Ah, yes, the child absolutely refused to wait for Martha to come and change her dress. And once her dress was changed, nothing would do for her but to put a matching ribbon!” Darcy smiled as he turned to shut the lid on Millie’s trunk.

“Who taught you to braid women’s hair like that?” The question was out before Elizabeth could think better of it, and she closed her eyes in

mortification. ‘*Oh, God, I did not really ask him that!*’ she thought, blushing profusely, but the ensuing silence told her that she had, indeed.

Something in her tone puzzled Darcy enough to turn and look at her sharply. He stared at her closed eyes and blushing countenance in surprise. ‘*What on earth is the matter with her?*’ He wondered in bemusement. Then he pondered on what she had asked him. ‘*Braiding women’s hair! Wait! Did she really believe I have learnt such a thing from my...*’ Darcy’s mouth dropped open as he finally understood what she was suspecting. For a moment, he was deeply offended at her vile suspicions. She was suspecting *him* of immoral behaviour! He, who was known in his circle for holding himself to the strictest code of morality. He opened his mouth to tell her exactly what he thought of such presumption when he paused and reflected once again on her question. ‘*Was there just a tiny bit of jealousy that I heard in her tone?*’ Although he could not be sure, he suspected it strongly. ‘*Maybe there is hope for me yet!*’ he thought gleefully, his anger evaporating.

He stared down at the mysterious pattern on Millie’s trunk and replied, “Braiding? Oh, I love braiding hair. There is something about the feel of silken hair running through my fingers that I cannot describe. Be it golden hair or red, I like them all, but dark chocolate ones are my favourite!” He sighed dramatically and continued, “And if a young lady looks at you just so and request especially for *your* assistance, what is a man to do?”

Darcy peeked at her and nearly laughed aloud at the comical dismay and outrage visible on her face.

‘*What is he saying? The immoral cad! He is talking so shamelessly about his affairs of the heart! Golden hair and red hair indeed!*’ Hurting with something that she could not identify as jealousy, Elizabeth stared at him in speechless outrage.

Darcy then turned to look at her directly. “Georgie did always insist that I help her braid the hair of her dolls. There was the red-haired Sarah and the golden-haired Peggy. And just like our Millie here, the ribbons were always to match the dresses! It seems there is something

else that I have remembered after all these years!" he said with a completely straight face.

Elizabeth stared in amazement as her brain slowly processed what he had said. *'He used to braid the hair of his sister's dolls, and I suspected him of.... And like a fool, I even let him know my stupid suspicions!'* The unholy glee in his eyes told her that he had caught on to her. "Oh, Lord! What must he think of me?" she thought miserably.

"Mr Darcy, I..." She came to an abrupt halt. *'How does one apologise for something that has not been said, had not been acknowledged, but the other person knows that it was meant?'* Elizabeth wondered wildly as she stared at him in consternation.

Darcy gazed at her embarrassed countenance, and despite his amusement, felt compelled to help her out of it. "Mr Talbot would soon be here, Miss Bennet. I will go and send Martha to you if you need any help?" When she nodded, he bowed and turned to go.

At the door, he called, "Miss Bennet?"

She raised her brow in enquiry, and he replied, "This morning, I also went to meet the vicar." He quickly glanced at Millie, then added, "Our friend is resting finally. I will tell you more later." When she nodded her understanding, he went out with another bow.

"Mr Darcy?" Elizabeth called urgently. Suddenly it became imperative that she did not let him leave without apologising for her insulting faux-pas. He turned to look at her. "I am sorry," she said, hoping fervently that he would understand and... not ask her the reason.

He did because he said softly, "Please forget it, Miss Bennet." Then he gave a sudden mischievous grin and added, "If Richard ever comes to know that someone suspected *me* of being such a Don Juan, he will laugh his guts out." When she blanched at his statement, he continued, "But I think I would let it remain a secret between us." He smiled at her broadly, forcing her to share in his amusement. Despite her embarrassment, she could appreciate the ridiculousness of the whole situation and smiled back at him.

As she watched his retreating back, she wondered at the feeling of

relief that flowed through her on finding that her suspicions were so absurd.

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Chapter 7

As Mr Darcy had promised, Martha came in a little while after he left the room. She came bearing a tray with a bowl of another of Mrs Webster's delicious broth.

"Mr Talbot would be here soon, Mrs Fitzwilliam. The mistress asked me to bring this now as the examination may delay your luncheon," she said, keeping the tray on the bedside table. "Would you be needing anything else?" she asked. When Elizabeth shook her head, she nodded. "Then I will come back when Mr Talbot is here."

The apothecary came not long after Elizabeth had finished her broth, followed by a smiling Martha who was carrying his bag. Mr Talbot was a jolly, rotund man, who quite strangely, kept muttering 'excellent' at regular intervals while examining various wounds and abrasions that the accident had inflicted on her.

"You have an excellent constitution, young lady, and are recovering well under Mrs Webster's care. I believe that apart from causing you some pain and discomfort for a few more days, the wound to your head should not trouble you anymore. However, just to be sure, we will take things a little slowly for a day or two. Take ample rest and do not indulge in any activity that would tire you out. I am leaving some powders to keep the pain and inflammation in check," he told Elizabeth as he started to leave. "Do get your husband to call me if you experience any other problem apart from the expected aches and pains!" he added before leaving the room with a bow, and Martha accompanied him once again.

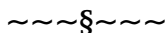
Once the other two had gone, Elizabeth started feeling a strange restlessness. She now regretted that she had forgotten to ask Martha to bring in her valise that contained the books she always travelled with. It would have helped pass some time. '*Maybe later,*' she thought, having no desire to create extra work for the maid. Deciding to while

away the time by observing the beauty of Mrs Webster's garden, she went to sit on the couch near the window. As soon as she sat, her senses were assailed by a faint but pleasant smell of sandalwood. The same smell that she had felt all around her when she woke up this morning. Puzzled, she closed her eyes and tried to think where she had smelt it before. *'Ah, it was how Mr Darcy had smelt when he carried me upstairs yesterday. Of course, the poor man must have slept on the couch last night,'* she decided, relieved at having solved the mystery. *'But then why had the smell been around me so strongly when I woke up?'* She looked in confusion at her bed and saw the extra pillow and the blanket kept neatly next to her own. *'Ah, another mystery solved! Well, Lizzy, if you want, you can give the best bow street runner in town stiff competition!'* She chuckled as she turned to gaze outside the window. *'Mr Darcy is turning out to be quite a cautious man in keeping up the appearances,'* she thought, smiling. As she looked out, her gaze came to rest on the man himself. It appeared he had just bid farewell to Mr Talbot, who was riding away on a large chestnut horse.

Unlike in the morning, when she had gazed at an empty garden and the horse enclosure nearby, presently, there was a lot of activity outside. In the garden, Millie was playing ball with a boy of about ten. John was leading a horse into the enclosure where Poseidon was already present. Despite her long-held antipathy with horses, Elizabeth drew in a sharp breath at the sheer grace and power that the new horse exuded. It was pure white and a complete foil to Poseidon, who was black as a moonless night. As she sat watching the activities of the two children and the horses, she observed that Mr Darcy went and started a conversation with John. It interested her to note that the angry pitchfork-wielding man of yesterday appeared quite reverential to Mr Darcy today. There was quite a bit of nodding and the exchange of a few warm smiles, and then, John went away. Mr Darcy stood leaning on the bars of the enclosure in a manner that allowed him to observe the horses and the children at the same time. Sometime later, John came back driving the pony cart, while Martha came out from the house to take Millie away. The little girl did not appear too pleased with the sudden change in plans. However, the canny maid

placated her soon enough. To Elizabeth's surprise, John then got down from the cart, and Mr Darcy hopped in the driver's seat in his stead and took the reins. The old man then said something to the little boy, who nodded and climbed into the cart to sit beside Mr Darcy. In the next instant, the pony cart was away with a gentle flick of Mr Darcy's hand as Elizabeth sat puzzling over the strange happenings.

A little while later, she gave up trying to understand Mr Darcy's actions. Instead, her mind went to dwell on something she had purposefully shied away from since yesterday- Millie. *'What would happen to the little girl now?'* With her grandmother dead there was no one to look after the innocent child, except, perhaps a father who had not even acknowledged her existence. More worryingly, Elizabeth had no clue who Millie's father was. *'Maybe Charlotte would know? But what would I do even if get to know that scoundrel's name? I will have to take her to Uncle and Aunt Gardiner. They would know what to do.'* However, she knew that as things stood at the moment, a life in an orphanage could be Millie's future. Elizabeth's heart revolted against such an outcome! The thought of that sweet, precocious child placed among strangers who might not treat her with kindness or empathy filled her with dread. Feeling agitated, Elizabeth got up and started pacing. Soon, her head started to ache, and she began to feel queasy. After taking the powder Mr Talbot had suggested for such an eventuality, she went to lie down. A few moments, later she was in a deep, dreamless sleep.



It was quite late when she woke up next. She shifted her head gingerly and waited anxiously. Thankfully the headache was gone. Sighing in relief, she slowly looked around the room. Her gaze first found Millie sleeping on the truckle bed. *'It really is quite late,'* she mused as she looked out of the window at the sky. A small movement to her right caught her eyes, and she turned her head towards it. This time she found Mr Darcy sitting stretched out in the easy chair, reading a book. The soothing domesticity of the entire image brought out a strange

yearning in her, and she swallowed painfully in a desperate bid to dislodge the lump that had somehow lodged itself in her throat. *‘At least he is not doing something fantastical this time,’* she thought irreverently in an attempt to channel her thoughts to safer areas.

Almost as if he sensed her gaze, Mr Darcy looked up from his book and smiled when he found her awake. “Ah, you are awake Miss Bennet and at the most opportune of times. You were sleeping so peacefully that I was quite reluctant to wake you up, but Martha would soon be coming up with our supper,” he said as he looked at her searchingly. “How are you feeling now?” he asked.

“I am very well, Mr Darcy. The headache and nausea that sent me scurrying to the bed have all but disappeared,” Elizabeth replied with a wry smile.

“Yes, that is what Mr Talbot had said. The more you rest, the faster you will recover.” He nodded. Before either of them could say anything further, there was a knock at the door, and like last evening Martha came in carrying their supper. Elizabeth was quite relieved to note that she too was to have ‘proper’ food today instead of the broth. *‘Good.’* Although she had found it delicious, she did not think she would have relished the broth as well one more time.

“Shall we?” Mr Darcy asked smilingly once Martha had left after arranging their trays. For a while there was near silence in the room except for the sound of the cutlery in use, as they both applied themselves to their food quite diligently.

After the first pangs of hunger had sated, Elizabeth addressed Mr Darcy with a grin, “There is something special in the air of this place, Mr Darcy. It appears to leave one quite famished.”

Darcy looked up at her with an answering grin. “To tell you the truth, Miss Bennet, I was waiting very impatiently for Martha to bring in our trays. But then it is always the case with me when I have indulged in some hard manual labour.”

“Hard manual labour?” Elizabeth asked in some surprise.

Looking quite chagrined he responded hurriedly, “Ah, it is nothing,

really.”

“It is not quite fair of you to leave me wondering like that, Mr Darcy. If you do not tell me now, I will spend the whole night worrying over what nefarious deeds you had got up to today!” She gave him an impish smile and added, “You do not want to be responsible for the insomnia of a poor injured woman, whom Mr Talbot has advised to take plentiful rest, now, do you?” She raised her brow at him challengingly.

Darcy shook his head at her exasperatedly, then gave a rueful grin, “Oh, very well, Miss Bennet. I will tell you, although it is nothing earth-shattering as I already warned you.” He sighed, then added, “When we came to the farmhouse, I noticed that the boundary fence was broken and had not been repaired very well. I understood the reason when I saw the bandage on John’s arm. The poor man is still recovering from a recent injury. So, this afternoon I went out to... ah... to mend the fences, so to say.” He finished with a weak jest.

The spoon in her hand stopped midway to her mouth. “You... mended the broken fence? With your own hands?” stunned, she asked slowly and a little foolishly.

“Well, yes, they were the only pair that I had at my disposal today,” he replied in amusement but grew embarrassed as she continued to stare at him in silence.

To break the uncomfortable silence, he said, “Though to be accurate, young Tom was a very good helper. Do not worry, Miss Bennet. I did quite a good job of it, even if I say so myself. My father used to say that you should be able to perform any task that you expect others to do for you.” He shrugged and added with a quick smile, “So, I am able to do almost anything... anything that is required on a farm at least.”

Elizabeth shook her head disbelievingly. “You know, Mr Darcy, if two days ago somebody had said what I am going to say next, I would have thought they were not quite right in the head.” She paused to stare at him once again, then added almost reluctantly, “But I *have* to say this, sir, you ... you are the kindest man of my acquaintance.”

Darcy did not know whether to be amused or chagrined at the surprise

evident in her face at what she believed to be his kind manner. But then, he also saw the reluctant admiration in her eyes and smiled inwardly. *‘Even if inadvertently, I have taken a step towards changing her opinion of me. A baby step, but a step in the right direction,’* he thought in satisfaction.

What he did not know was that it was not a baby step, but almost a giant leap and poor Elizabeth was left quite confused at this extremely kind, almost stranger, who had come bursting into her life since yesterday. She did not know what to think anymore! *‘Mayhap this Mr Darcy has an arrogant, disdainful twin who had visited Meryton and Rosings in his stead?’* she thought, resorting to jest, her most favoured weapon against uncomfortable, confusing emotions!

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As he got up to leave his empty tray on the table, Darcy’s gaze swept over the sleeping child, and he remembered that he had been meaning to ask Miss Bennet about Millie.

“Miss Bennet?”

When Elizabeth looked at him enquiringly, he asked, “What can you tell me about Millie?” As Elizabeth pondered on what and how much to tell him, he added, “I ask as I want to know where should we take her once we leave here. Yesterday Smith was naturally agitated when I told him about Mrs Dawson’s unfortunate demise, but he was more concerned about our Millie. It seems his sister told him that Mrs Dawson and Millie had no one else but each other.”

Elizabeth looked at his concerned face and suddenly realized that instead of Uncle Gardiner, Mr Darcy may be the best person to tell her what to do regarding Millie, especially under the circumstances. The compassionate side to him that she had seen told her that if he could, he would definitely help Millie.

“I have myself been quite worried about her since yesterday. I had decided to take her to my uncle and ask him to help her, but maybe you could tell me what would be the best approach in this case.”

Elizabeth looked at him questioningly.

“Of course. I will try to help to the best of my abilities,” he said, nodding at her to go on.

“I am not sure about the complete facts, Mr Darcy, but I can tell you what Charlotte had told me about the situation. Mr Smith is mostly right, Mrs Dawson had only Millie for her family.”

“*Mostly* right?” Darcy asked, his brows raised.

Elizabeth smiled involuntarily at how quickly he caught on to the nuance. “Let me tell the facts from the beginning. Mrs Dawson came to Hunsford parish three years ago to keep house for her ailing brother, a baker in the village. Her widowed daughter Emily and granddaughter, a few months old Millie, also came along with her. One year later, Mrs Dawson’s brother passed away. He willed his money to his sister, and the ladies continued to stay on in Hunsford. Millie’s mother did some sewing, and embroidery work also in the village. She was somewhat sickly and, unfortunately, did not survive the pneumonia she contracted at the end of last year.”

“Oh! How sad for Mrs Dawson and poor Millie, orphaned at such a young age!” Darcy exclaimed.

“Yes, Mr Darcy. That is what everyone in the village believes. Although, for all intents and purposes, Millie is an orphan. The truth is, her father is still alive.”

She nodded when Darcy quirked a surprised brow and continued, “A few weeks ago, Mrs Dawson approached Charlotte for some advice. Since she came to Hunsford, Charlotte has taken her duties as a parson’s wife very assiduously, and the ladies in the village often approach her for assistance and advice. However, Mrs Dawson’s problem was quite different from the [run of the mill](#) matters she generally gets consulted on. So much so that Charlotte felt that she needed someone to corroborate the suggestion she was planning to offer Mrs Dawson. That is how I know these facts.” Elizabeth paused for a breath and found Darcy leaning forward and listening intently.

“It is quite a sad story, really. Although Mrs Dawson did not tell many

details about the places and the people involved, the salient points are as follows. After she was widowed, Mrs Dawson worked as a cook in a private seminary for girls. The principal of the seminary was a kind lady who allowed Emily to be educated in her seminary in the hope of getting her a position as a governess or some such. After completing her education, Emily did get hired as a governess by one of the prominent families in that area. Mrs Dawson thought that her dream of a better future for her only child was coming to fruition.”

Elizabeth sighed deeply and shook her head. “Unfortunately, what followed was more a nightmare than a dream. Her daughter was naïve enough to believe it when one of the family members promised her marriage. The result was that less than a year after she had left the seminary to start a new life, she was back in her mother’s home - ruined, hopeless, and ... and expecting a child. The father had not only reneged on the offer of marriage, but he also refused to shoulder any responsibility for the child. Millie was born in the seminary, as the two women had nowhere else to go.”

Elizabeth glanced at Mr Darcy and was disconcerted to see a thunderous expression on his face. She felt confused as to the reason behind his rage but did not remain in suspense for long as he burst out angrily, “I detest charlatans who take advantage of gullible girls with starry dreams in their eyes. Poor Emily! Her whole life wasted as some scoundrel could not control his base...” He coloured and stopped abruptly when he found Elizabeth staring at him with wide eyes. After a while, he said awkwardly, “I am sorry for interrupting you in this ill-mannered way, Miss Bennet. Please continue.”

Elizabeth nodded and resumed the story. “From what Mrs Dawson told Charlotte, her daughter was too ashamed to have failed her mother and her kind teachers and did not want to stay in the seminary anymore. So, when Mrs Dawson’s brother wrote to her requesting her help, she thought it was the best opportunity for her daughter to start her life afresh. All of them moved to Hunsford, where she introduced her daughter as a widow. Unfortunately, her brother and daughter passed away in quick succession as I mentioned earlier, and Mrs Dawson and Millie were the only ones left. And now... that poor lady

is gone too - leaving Millie all alone.” Suddenly Elizabeth felt oppressed by the whole sad tale and fell quiet.

“Miss Bennet?” Darcy called softly when the silence stretched.

When she looked at him, he asked, “Umm... you did not tell what advice did Mrs Dawson sought from Mrs Collins? And why was she going to London?”

“Once her daughter passed away last December, Mrs Dawson got extremely worried for Millie’s future. While she still had some money of what her brother had left her, it was in no way sufficient for Millie’s future. It was the last straw when she also started feeling poorly some time ago. She finally revealed the sorry tale to Charlotte in the hope of getting some sound advice.”

“And... what did Mrs Collins suggest?” Darcy asked curiously.

“Once Charlotte came to know that the staff at the seminary while being disappointed with Emily, had still been kind to her and her daughter, she asked Mrs Dawson to take little Millie to the seminary. Additionally, she advised Mrs Dawson to approach Millie’s father to settle some amount on her to ensure a better future for the child at the seminary. Mrs Dawson saw the sense in the advice and was going to London to try and meet Millie’s father.”

At the mention of Millie’s father, Darcy’s face darkened again, and he got up from his seat agitatedly. “Miss Bennet, do you know who is Millie’s father?” When Elizabeth shook her head, he pursed his lips in disappointment and asked, “Would Mrs Collins know?”

“I do not think so, but I can write to her and ask,” Elizabeth said.

“Yes... please do that.” He nodded, still appearing agitated. “I... I need to talk to Jones; I will be back in a while,” he said as he started to go out. “Miss Bennet?” he called from the door.

“Yes, Mr Darcy?”

“Please do not worry,” he said as he jerked his head towards Millie. “We will think of something,” he added reassuringly, then left the room.

Although Elizabeth had retired some time ago, she was still awake when Mr Darcy opened the door of their chamber. She thought it best to feign sleep. Mr Darcy had been extremely considerate in giving her privacy each night. The least she could do was reciprocate. He came in and slowly walked up to Millie's bed. For a long while, there was silence. Curious, Elizabeth looked at him under her lashes and saw him reach out a hand towards Millie. "Do not worry, poppet, everything will turn out just fine," he whispered and brushed the child's cheek with his knuckles. The tenderness in the action made tears prick her eyes.

Then he turned and walked towards her bed. Again, from under her lashes, she saw him walk to the opposite side and pick up his pillow and blanket. He was turning to go back when he stopped all of a sudden and stretched out a hand towards her! She hurriedly shut her eyes and waited. The unexpected realization that she dreaded and wanted his touch in equal measures left her feeling quite stunned. The next instant, she heard his steps walking away. It appeared that he had mastered whatever impulse had made him reach out to her so imprudently. The sharp stab of disappointment she experienced at the fact only increased her shock.

A few minutes later, which were mostly spent in a tussle with his shoes, he snuffed the candle and lay back with a groan of relief. Elizabeth also tried her best to sleep. The herculean effort even included counting thousand black sheep. Alas! To no avail. She was still awake when she heard a soft snore emanating from near the window. She turned her head to look towards Mr Darcy. She could just make out his shape in the soft moonlight filtering in through the curtains, but she could see that his feet were dangling from one end of the couch. The sight only increased the disquiet she had been experiencing from the moment he had stretched his hands towards her. She turned her head again and stared at the [ceiling](#). She was now sure that Miss de Bourgh had been talking about her cousin when she made that enigmatic remark about first appearances. A man who mended broken fences for an old lady out of kindness, took it upon



himself to ensure the wellbeing of an orphaned little girl, and spent his nights sleeping on a too-small couch for a woman who had so cruelly rejected his heart, *could not* be the scoundrel Mr Wickham had painted him. ‘*I really need to look at our entire acquaintance once again - maybe without the glasses of prejudice I have worn ever since I heard his comment about my tolerable appearance!*’ she thought restlessly.

“But not right now,” she mumbled to herself. The ache that started in her head once again reminded her of Mr Talbot’s advice about rest, and she buried her face in the pillow with increased determination.

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Chapter 8

When Elizabeth woke up the next morning, she felt much better despite having slept at such a late hour. She looked around and found that she was alone in the room. It appeared that Mr Darcy and Millie both were already up and about. She looked out of the window at the beautiful morning and suddenly decided to go down for breakfast. Anyhow one more day of being cooped up in the room was a wholly unattractive proposition.

When she reached the dining room, she found Mrs Webster still at breakfast. "Ah, Elizabeth! Please join me. It is good to see you downstairs, looking so much better too." Their hostess smiled in welcome.

Elizabeth had just returned the lady's kind greeting when she found herself being addressed once again. "Do you think it is wise, my dear? Mr Talbot advised you rest." Darcy asked in concern as he entered the room after her.

"Mr Talbot only asked me not to overtire myself, sir. I can assure you, coming down for a meal would definitely not tire me out." Elizabeth smiled.

Darcy gave her a searching glance, then nodded reluctantly. Once they were all seated, Elizabeth asked about Millie's whereabouts.

"I sent Millie out with Tom to pick some flowers. She was once again asking after her grandmother," Mrs Webster replied sombrely. "By the by, I told her that her grandmother is staying with a friend and is unable to travel at the moment. I am sorry Elizabeth, Mr Fitzwilliam, but she was so insistent this time around that I had to tell her something. However, I really *could not* tell her the truth," she added after a while.

Elizabeth and Darcy nodded their understanding. There was an uncomfortable silence on the table for some time, as they all were busy with their thoughts about poor Millie. To lighten the oppressive atmosphere, Mrs Webster addressed Darcy, "I saw that you went out for a ride on Pegasus, Mr Fitzwilliam. I hope he did not play any of his usual tricks on you."

"No, not really, Mrs Webster. He was a little frisky in the beginning, but we came to an understanding soon enough. It also helped that I was already alert to any possible tricks since John had warned me beforehand. Consequently, I had quite an invigorating ride." Darcy smiled at her.

"I am quite relieved to hear that." Mrs Webster smiled back. "Mr Fitzwilliam, John informs me that I have to thank you for coming to our aid regarding the repair to the boundary fence," she added.

"There is no need to thank me, ma'am. In fact, I believe I should beg your pardon for taking the repair work on myself without first bothering to inform you about it. You could blame my compulsive streak for that. Whenever I see something that I can fix, I feel comfortable only after the task has somehow been accomplished."

"Begging pardon for helping us out! You are a strange one, Mr Fitzwilliam. That fence that you mended will bring a lot of peace of mind to both John and me. You do not know, but we have been having a spate of trouble recently. The reinforced fence would help John..." Mrs Webster's words were interrupted by a squeal from Millie, who came rushing in with a posy of beautiful peonies. With a delighted smile, she offered one each to Elizabeth and Mrs Webster. However, the biggest and the most striking red one, was reserved for Darcy.

"Red flower, Dawcy!" The child offered it to him proudly. "Thank you, poppet. It is beautiful." Darcy took it from her with a smile and put it on the lapel of his coat. With a happy chuckle and a few claps, the child started to amble out of the room once again.

When he turned to glance at the ladies in the room, he was a little disconcerted to find them both regarding him with identical, amused

smiles. He cleared his throat self-consciously and addressed himself to Mrs Webster. “Actually, I wanted to talk to you regarding this trouble that you mentioned, ma’am. You do not have any reason to trust me but...”

“On the contrary, Mr Fitzwilliam, I believe that I have quite a few!” Mrs Webster interrupted him as she meaningfully glanced at little Millie walking out of the door and then looked back at him. In that one moment, Elizabeth knew with complete certainty that whatever the old lady was saying was absolutely correct. Mr Darcy was a person one could trust implicitly. What she was now unable to understand was how she could have been so wrong about him? While Mr Wickham’s stories about Mr Darcy had cemented her dislike of him, it was his own behaviour that had initiated the antipathy. And really his interference with Jane... Her musings were interrupted by Mr Darcy clearing his throat and speaking once again.

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“Yes... well... you may think it is presumptuous of me, Mrs Webster, but I was hoping to know more about this trouble you are facing. I believe I might be of some help. I... I assist the justice of the peace in my county, and the experience might come in handy.” Although Darcy himself was the magistrate in his area, he did not want to boast or give Mrs Webster cause to get curious about their identities.

Mrs Webster looked doubtful at that but still narrated the tale as requested by him. “The problem started a fortnight ago when one evening John found a couple of miscreants trying to damage our boundary fence as he was returning from the village. Luckily John had a couple of his cronies from The Red Lion with him. On seeing that they were outnumbered, the miscreants ran away or rather rode away. At the time, they were not successful in damaging the fence. John tried to give chase, but it was an unequal one since he was in the pony cart, and those men got away easily.”

The lady gave her audience a bewildered look. “Frankly, Mr Fitzwilliam, we could not understand the purpose behind the incident.

Till this event, we never even bothered to lock our gates at night. Theft and vandalism are almost unheard of in Bassingtonstoke. Moreover, there is nothing here worth stealing, except perhaps....” Mrs Webster’s voice petered off.

“Except Pegasus?” Darcy asked quietly.

Mrs Webster nodded unhappily and continued with her story. “Although at the time we believed that it was an attempt at mischief by some drunken strangers passing through our village, still we started to put a padlock on the entry gate at night. Things remained quiet for more than a week after the incident, but five days ago, there was another attack. This time they came late at night.”

The distressing recollections appeared to upset the old lady, and she fell quiet for a while. Darcy and Elizabeth continued to wait in silence, and their patience was rewarded presently. Taking a deep breath, Mrs Webster resumed the narration. “Five days ago, I woke up after hearing a commotion outside the house. As fast as I could, I went out with my rifle.

Yes... the same one with which I welcomed you that day,” she added with a wan smile.

“When I reached outside, I found John and my grandson Cyril attempting to fight with two assailants, one of whom was wielding a knife. For a while, I could only watch helplessly as the knife-wielder slashed John on his arm and the other man hit Cyril on his shoulder with a piece of wood. I could force myself to act only when I noticed that both John and my grandson were getting overpowered by their assailants. I rushed forward and warned them, much as I had warned you on your arrival. Thankfully the view down the barrel of the rifle appeared to make an impact. The men decided to quit, but not before one of them pushed me down on his way out. They left behind a group of injured and bewildered people, for I too suffered a sprain in my foot when I fell.” She shook her head and sighed deeply.

“It was much later that John informed me that he had woken up due to Pegasus’s screams. Those men, it appeared, had been trying to get to our horse, and it was his violent reaction to their misadventure that

protected him and woke up John.”

“And since then, John has been sleeping in the loft above the stables to prevent any further mishap?” Darcy asked.

A quick nod was his only response. Before Darcy could ask any more questions that were clamouring in his mind, Mrs Webster spoke, “My grandson did say that we could sell Pegasus. It would not only thwart whoever was trying this mischief but also do away with the necessity of constantly keeping this tension-filled watch every night. But I just cannot bring myself to do that, even though I have no real need for Pegasus at the moment. I did not sell him last year when my Simon passed away, and I really was in some difficulties.

Cyril has gone back to London now, but he said he would be back sometime later to check if I have changed my mind. But I cannot sell that horse. He gives me hope that...” The old lady suddenly went silent.

Realizing that Mrs Webster would not be revealing anything further unless prompted, Darcy asked her gently, “Who offered to buy Pegasus a year ago?”

“No one had actually offered to buy him, Mr Fitzwilliam. However, Cyril did make some inquiries on my behalf when he came to know of my difficulties with... with repayment of a loan.” Darcy and Elizabeth exchanged a look, and this time Elizabeth asked the old lady, “Has anyone shown an interest in purchasing Pegasus in the past year?”

“No... no one has approached me.” Mrs Webster shook her head.

“Well, he is a dream of a horse, a pure thoroughbred. Had you wanted to sell him, I would have been very tempted to give you an offer for him myself.” Darcy’s smile faltered a little at the look on the old lady’s face. “Please do not worry, ma’am. I will not do so now that I am aware of your unwillingness to part with him.”

For a while, there was a strained silence at the table as Darcy pondered on how to help Mrs Webster. The only person who had shown any interest in the horse in the past year was her own grandson! In all probability, the man had been trying to help out a

relative who was facing difficulties - both financial and otherwise. It was hard to solve the mystery of the attack in the limited time he had left in Bassingtonstoke. However, he could begin by making things more secure and comfortable for their kind hostess. *‘But how to do so without hurting her self-esteem?’* He mused uneasily. All of a sudden, an idea occurred to him, and he smiled to himself. The best part was that the scheme was beneficial for him also. Perhaps, that would make it easier to convince Mrs Webster. Feeling buoyed, he addressed the old lady. “Mrs Webster?”

“Yes, Mr Fitzwilliam?”

“I have a request to make.”

The old lady silently raised her brow, and he replied, “I understand that I cannot have the thoroughbred that you have in your stable, but I think you will not have any objection if he sires one for mine?”

“I am sorry, I do not take your meaning, Mr Fitzwilliam,” Mrs Webster replied in a confused voice.

“I have a mare in my stables. More precisely, it is my sister Georgie’s favourite mare. For some time now, Georgie has been desirous of acquiring a foal from her favourite. I believe that in Pegasus, we have found the perfect candidate for that coveted foal’s sire.”

“Oh, I see.” That was all the response Mrs Webster offered.

Believing that she needed to be convinced further, Darcy added, “I will, of course, be paying the prevalent market rate for the... ah... service,” he finished a little awkwardly.

Looking amused at his sudden discomfort, Mrs Webster waved that away. “What is the name of the mare?” she asked abruptly, giving Darcy a searching glance.

“Her name is Snowdrop,” Darcy replied with a sheepish grin. “She was named so for the obvious reason – that she is as white as a snowdrop. However, please do not blame me for the unoriginal choice. Georgie is the one who named her.”

Suddenly, Mrs Webster appeared more relaxed. Offering one of her more genuine smiles, she replied, “I think it was a perfect choice. Very

well, Mr Fitzwilliam, I am quite happy to grant your request.”

“Capital! Georgie will be delighted to know that.” Darcy gave a pleased smile in response. “I would need some time to make arrangements for Snowdrop to be brought here, but I believe that we can easily be back here sometime next month if that is convenient to you?” he asked.

“That should not be a problem,” Mrs Webster replied.

“Great! And, ma’am, now that I have found a way to fulfil my sister’s long-cherished wish, I would not want anything to spoil it So... I am hoping that you will not mind if... if I ask Jones to employ someone to guard Pegasus at night.” As Mrs Webster’s brow shot up in surprise, he added hurriedly, “Only for the intervening time till we come back with Snowdrop.”

“Oh, but I really cannot allow you to...” Mrs Webster began in bemusement.

“Please, Mrs Webster, it will greatly relieve my mind if you grant one more request. I am only thinking about my sister’s happiness.”

“Oh, very well, Mr Fitzwilliam, do as you deem fit,” the lady replied dryly.

“Then I will go and discuss the arrangements with John.” Darcy got up and excused himself.

When he was at the door, Mrs Webster called him suddenly, “Mr Fitzwilliam?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Now that you have arranged everything so beautifully, I would suggest you take Elizabeth and little Millie out for a small picnic.” She smiled in amusement when Darcy flushed after realizing that she had been wise to his intentions.

“Oh, but...” He began to protest but was interrupted by the good lady.

“Please do not worry, Mr Fitzwilliam, I am now taking your wife to the parlour with me. There she can put up her feet and rest while giving me her delightful company. This way, she need not tramp



upstairs and down multiple times and tire herself. Also, the picnic spot I am suggesting is a prettyish wilderness, just behind the house. I am sure both Millie and Elizabeth would greatly enjoy themselves there.”

Darcy looked at the palpable anticipation on Elizabeth’s face and grinned. “There you have me, Mrs Webster. Very well, we will go for this picnic as soon as I am back.” Although he addressed Mrs Webster, he looked at Elizabeth as he spoke. The delighted smile he received in return made him blink. It was with difficulty that he remembered that he had a few arrangements to make and forced himself to leave with a bow to the ladies.

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Mrs Webster watched him go with an amused smile, then turned towards Elizabeth. “If ever Mr Fitzwilliam is looking for an alternate career, tell him from me to never try his luck walking the boards.” The old lady grinned and added, “That man cannot dissemble to save his life! Had I not discerned that he is genuinely interested in that foal for his sister, I would have been very hard-pressed to accept his help, even though I need it badly.”

Elizabeth gave Mrs Webster a sheepish smile and replied, “Alex always does prefer a square dealing.”

Mrs Webster nodded and motioned for Elizabeth to follow her to the parlour. After a few moments of silence, she spoke again, “You know, he reminds me so much of my Simon. That outwardly tough persona with an unfortunate tendency towards arrogance - that sometimes make them appear cold. Most deceptively so because the inner core is all gentleness and empathy.” She gave a reminiscent smile and added, “We are lucky, you and I, that we found such men. As would be any children that you both will be blessed with.”

For no good reason, her words left Elizabeth with a desire to weep. She could not understand why she should suddenly be assailed with a feeling of acute loss. It was with difficulty she forced herself to pay attention to what Mrs Webster was saying further.

“My father, although fair, was an indifferent sort of man. I can tell you that life can often be challenging with people of that ilk, especially if they have complete power over you.”

Elizabeth nodded in understanding. It appeared that Mrs Webster was in a mood to reminisce, and she was more than happy to lend a willing ear. *‘Maybe I would come across something that would help Mr Darcy to solve the mystery of the attacks that the good lady has faced.’* Elizabeth decided as she sat back comfortably to listen.

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## Chapter 9

Elizabeth had a long and revealing chat with Mrs Webster by the time Mr Darcy came back after his discussions with John. She had understood it right; the kind lady had truly been wanting to unburden herself. The fortitude and strength with which she had faced the most sad and trying of circumstances in her life made Elizabeth respect and admire her all the more. Elizabeth also believed that some of the things that she had learnt needed to be shared with Mr Darcy if, as it appeared, he was planning to help their hostess. Since Mrs Webster had not sworn her to secrecy, she did not think she would be betraying any secrets when she did so.

Mrs Webster first noticed Darcy entering the parlour and addressed him, “Ah, you are back Mr Fitzwilliam. I hope you were able to settle everything to your satisfaction?”

“Yes, ma’am. I must say you have got a treasure in John.” Darcy smiled.

“I totally agree with you there, sir.”

“Beth! Dawcy! Come. Dolly and me going for pic-ick,” a merry voice called out from the doorway. After waving her doll at them, Millie pulled at Martha’s arm eagerly. The smiling maid willingly allowed herself to be dragged forward.

“Shall we, my dear?” Darcy asked Elizabeth, who nodded and readily got up from her seat.

“Why does the child keep calling you Dorsey?” Mrs Webster asked.

There was a sudden, awkward silence at the uncomfortable question, and for a long moment, Darcy stared at her mutely. Then he replied in a constrained voice, “Umm... I really do not...”

“I think Millie is confusing you with Stephen Dorsey, Alex darling.

Don't you remember him, the vicar's second son? He is as tall as you and has the same dark, wavy hair." Elizabeth interrupted him calmly. Darcy stared at her blankly for a moment, then blinked. "I can't say that I had noticed Stephen's... ah.. wavy hair, my dear. However, now that you mention it, that seems to be the most plausible explanation for Millie's confusion," He murmured in response. Despite her best efforts, Elizabeth found herself flushing at the smile in his eyes.

Mrs Webster nodded sagely. "Hmm... Of course, a child of three can easily be expected to mix up two very similar looking people."

Breathing a sigh of relief at safely navigating a dangerous situation, Darcy motioned to Elizabeth to move to the door as he excused themselves to Mrs Webster.

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"That was quite a close thing! Thank you for coming to my rescue so precipitately back there," Darcy said in a relieved voice once they were out of hearing of anyone inside the house.

"How could I not? When you looked so like a landed fish! I would not have been able to square it with my conscience had I not lifted a finger to put the poor fish back into the water." Elizabeth chuckled.

Darcy smiled ruefully at her teasing words, but before he could respond, Elizabeth continued, "Besides, the day we came here, we agreed to a course of action. Now it is up to both of us to see things through. Today, Mrs Webster rightly said that you could not dissemble to save your life. What puzzles me, however, is how swiftly you came up with that story and the fictitious name on the day of the accident." She glanced at him askance.

"Oh, but that story was an outcome of quite a lot of deliberation. All the way from The Red Lion to this place, I was mulling on what I should tell our hostess about us. As far as the name is concerned, it really did not require much thought because there is nothing fictitious about it."

When Elizabeth turned her head and looked at him questioningly, he

smiled and bowed slightly. "Fitzwilliam Alexander Darcy at your service, madam."

"Ah, so, you share a name with Colonel Fitzwilliam."

"Yes, my mother wanted my name to reflect a connect with *her* family name."

"Hmm.." Elizabeth nodded. After a while, she added thoughtfully, "I prefer Alex. It suits you. Rather, it suits the man I met two days ago." Then almost as if she had lost control over her tongue, she found herself murmuring, "I feel as if I encountered Fitzwilliam Darcy in Meryton and Rosings, and I have to say that I like Alex much... much more."

Although Elizabeth's eyes were warm with approbation, still Darcy flushed at the reminder of his arrogant behaviour in the past. Then to his relief came the realization that his desire to improve her opinion of him seemed to be on the verge of fulfilment, and he cheered inwardly. "I like that name myself. Although it is many years since anyone called me by it."

When Elizabeth raised her brow enquiringly, he explained, "All my friends and relatives call me either Fitzwilliam or Darcy. It was only my grandmother, who used to call me Alex. She passed away when I was still at Eton, and no one has addressed me as Alex since then. Except... you," he added with a smile.

"Miss Darcy also addresses you as Fitzwilliam?" Elizabeth asked curiously.

"Well, depending on her mood, I can be brother, Fitzwilliam, or... Fitz."

"Hmm... speaking of Miss Darcy - I think she would be ecstatic when she learns about your agreement with Mrs Webster regarding her Snowdrop."

"Oh, yes, she would be delighted," Darcy replied with an eager smile. Then his smile faltered a little as he continued, "At least, I hope so. She really needs something to raise her spirits."

Elizabeth was surprised at the sudden change in Mr Darcy's

countenance. The fleeting, bleak look that had shadowed his face disturbed her. She opened her mouth to enquire the reason but decided against it on second thoughts. He had been quite cheerful when they started their walk. She had no desire to cause him further anguish, only to satisfy her curiosity.

"I am sure it will be so," was all she said in response.

Darcy nodded his thanks and made a deliberate attempt to push away his dark thoughts. Further conversation was suspended as they came upon the site of the picnic. Elizabeth gasped and stared admiringly at the beautiful place.

Martha had placed a rug under a tree. Millie's dolly sat proudly on it, guarding the food basket kept alongside. The child herself was busy playing ball with Tom nearby. She saw them arriving and beckoned them happily. "Dawcy, Beth!"

Elizabeth waved to the child, then murmured to Darcy, "I believe we need to be very careful of what we speak around the little one, beginning with how we address each other... Alex. I do not think my ingenuity or Mrs Webster's credulity will survive it if I have to claim next that *I* also resemble a Miss Bennet - neighbour to Mr Dorsey, the vicar's son!"

Darcy chuckled and replied, "I could not agree more, Elizabeth. Now, I can only marvel that I allowed myself to be so careless around a precocious child who so loves to talk!"

"You and me both, sir. The only way we can assuage our conscience a little is by blaming the fact that it is quite a long time since we entertained a child of that age," Elizabeth said wryly.

Before Darcy could respond to that, Martha approached them. "I hope you enjoy the picnic, madam, sir. If you need anything, please do send Tom to me." Then she left them with a smile and a curtesy. Elizabeth and Darcy sat down and, for a while, quietly absorbed the magic of their restful surroundings.

After some time, Darcy called her, "Elizabeth?"

"Yes?"

“I think you were quite right about there being something special in the air of this place. Umm.. can we check what Mrs Webster has provided in that very tempting basket?”

Elizabeth grinned and reached for the basket, “Of course, sir. Let us call the children too. I am sure they would be no less eager than you to explore the contents of the basket.”

As expected, Tom and Millie came rushing forward on being called. Unfortunately, Millie fell down in her hurry to reach them. Darcy picked up the crying child hastily. “Where does it hurt, poppet?” The child raised her right hand in response. “Ah, then let me kiss it better for you,” he said, suiting his actions to word. Elizabeth’s brow rose in surprise at the speed with which the little girl’s tears stopped flowing. Any remnants of her hurt were further routed at the sight of the delicious fruit cake that Elizabeth took out from the basket.

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Once they had partaken in the sumptuous meal and the children had gone back to their play, Elizabeth decided to apprise Darcy of what she had learnt from Mrs Webster.

“Alex?”

Darcy, who was smilingly observing the antics of the two children, turned to look at her. “Hmm?”

“I noticed your interest in the doings of Mr Cyril Webster in the morning. While you were gone, I had quite an illuminating conversation with Mrs Webster, and I believe that you might find some of it helpful for your purpose.”

As Darcy sat watching her, he came to a sudden realization that together they made a very good team. Without any overt communication from him, she had understood what he suspected and was now trying to help him accordingly. The awareness caused a strange, warm feeling in his heart, and for some time, he stayed silent - wanting to savour the feeling.

It disconcerted Elizabeth to find him staring at her so intently, and she

asked doubtfully, “Alex... Mr Darcy? Is anything the matter?”

“No... no. Everything is all right, Elizabeth. Tell me what you discovered, please.”

“You will understand my misgivings if I give you the complete story. But before that, I have to say that Mrs Webster is a very brave woman. Earlier, I was enamoured of her gentleness, but now after hearing her story, I have come to respect her strength.”

Darcy sat back more comfortably as he realized that the telling would take some time and nodded for her to go on.

“Mr and Mrs Webster had two sons. The elder one stayed here and assisted his father with the farm. Unfortunately, he and his wife perished in a carriage accident almost a decade ago. Their orphaned son was then raised by the doting grandparents.

“Our Cyril?” Darcy asked.

“Ah, no. This grandson is called Jonathan Webster. Cyril is the son of Mrs Webster’s second son, who is a vicar somewhere in Oxfordshire.”

“Hmm... So, where is this Jonathan Webster now?”

“No one knows, unfortunately.”

“Excuse me?”

“Jonathan joined the army nearly three years ago. When Mrs Webster last heard from him, his unit was fighting the French in Spain. At the beginning of this year, Mrs Webster got a letter from the army informing her that Jonathan was reported missing after his unit was involved in a skirmish with the French in the last week of November 1811. When the field was being searched for the injured and the survivors, it was discovered that Jonathan was neither among the injured nor the dead. Since the altercation had taken place near a ridge below which a river was flowing, it was suspected that perhaps Jonathan fell into the river while fighting. At the time of the letter being sent, Jonathan had been missing for nearly two weeks. While it was not stated in so many words, but it was apparent to Mrs Webster that she was being told not to hope for a miracle.” Elizabeth paused to draw a deep breath, then added almost in a whisper. “That good lady,



however, says that had something really happened to her grandson, she would have *'known it in her bones'*. So, she firmly believes that Jonathan is alive and will come back to her when the time comes."

There was a poignant silence after the statement, finally broken by Darcy. "Pegasus belongs to Jonathan, doesn't it? And that is why she is loath to part with him." It was more a statement than a question, and Elizabeth smiled her appreciation of his quick mind. "Yes, it was bought for him by old Mr Webster. Although he bought it from a friend at a considerably reduced price, still it was quite a lot of money for the Websters. The old man bought it with the hope that Jonathan's interest in all things equestrian might trump his fascination for the army. Unfortunately, things did not unfold as he desired. A year after Pegasus joined the Webster's household, Jonathan left it to join the army."

"Oh, one can easily understand Mr Webster's compulsions. With his son and daughter already gone, he would have been desperate to keep the boy safe from any harm," Darcy said with an empathetic smile. "However, more often than not, life charts its own course," he added ruefully.

"True..." Elizabeth sighed, then continued, "Mrs Webster told me that once Jonathan went, her husband changed considerably. When their grandson was with them, Mr Webster had the reassurance that if he passed on, the boy would take care of his grandmother and the farm. Now with that assurance gone, the old man started worrying for his wife. So much so that he even changed his will. The farmhouse was Jonathan's inheritance, but to ensure that Mrs Webster will always have a roof over her head, Mr Webster has now left it to Mrs Webster. He left a small annuity for John with a promise from the faithful man Friday to continue to serve Mrs Webster as long as he could. He even took a loan from the local squire to carry out some much-needed repair work on the farmhouse. While he could oversee the repair work himself, unfortunately, he passed on last year before he could completely repay the loan."

"Ah, the loan that was mentioned in the morning," Darcy murmured,

and Elizabeth nodded in response.

“But where are Cyril, his father, and other family members in all this?” Darcy asked curiously.

“Yes... well.... With four children, the youngest of whom is still in the nursery, Reverend James Webster has his hands full with his flock and his family. Though a kind man, and a good son, he neither has the pecuniary resources nor the required time to help in this situation,” Elizabeth replied with a shrug.

“What about Cyril Webster?”

“Cyril is the eldest of his siblings. He stays in London and is a clerk at the warehouse of a wealthy tradesman, a Mr Sandiford.”

“Sandiford... I seem to have heard that name somewhere.”

“That is what even I felt. Then I remembered that Uncle Gardiner talks about him sometimes because of his stupendous success in the shipping business.”

“Oh. Perhaps that is why I also heard his name. A year or so ago, I was looking for some investment opportunities in that area.” Darcy nodded, then continued, “Umm.. Elizabeth, you suggested that I might find the story helpful with regards to Cyril’s involvement in the mystery, but...”

“Yes, I was just coming to the relevant part. Frankly, from what Mrs Webster told me, there is nothing truly conclusive that points a finger towards Cyril. However, I have this strange feeling that he is somehow involved in all this. You might call it a woman’s intuition,” Elizabeth said with a wry look at him.

“Oh, I have a very healthy respect for a woman’s intuition. My Aunt Susan has them quite regularly, and she is right more times than she is not.” Darcy grinned at her.

Elizabeth smiled in return and said, “Then let me tell you the rest. Cyril and Jonathan are of the same age, and a young Cyril often spent his holidays here at the farmhouse. The visits, however, reduced in frequency as the boys grew older and nearly stopped once they joined college. When Cyril came to attend the funeral of his grandfather last

year, he was visiting Bassingtonstoke after a gap of nearly four years. Since then, however, he has been a regular visitor here. Mrs Webster believes that it is so because he realized that she needed support in these difficult times. It may very well be so, but the manner in which he had this sudden epiphany after four years, and only after Mr Webster passed away... it all makes me somewhat... sceptical of his intentions. The feeling got heightened after discovering that he is the only one who has ever talked about selling Pegasus.

Oh, I agree that Mrs Webster does need the money, and that Cyril mentioned quite a handsome price for the horse after his inquiries last year... but.." Elizabeth's voice trailed off doubtfully.

"Do you know what was the price he mentioned?" Darcy asked with interest. Elizabeth nodded and stated the amount. Darcy's brow rose in surprise. "Pegasus is quite a rare horse - a white thoroughbred. He can easily fetch twice the amount you mentioned."

As Elizabeth's eyes widened at the disclosure, Darcy cautioned her with a shrug. "Again, we cannot be sure who quoted such a throwaway price, the buyer himself or Cyril. However, I happen to agree with you that we do need to look into the doings of Mr Cyril Webster more carefully. Finally, it may all turn out to be a hum, but an investigation is definitely warranted," he said. After contemplating the situation for a while, he added, "Maybe, I will pay a visit to Mr Sandiford's warehouse once we get back to London. I had already asked John if anyone in the village has shown an interest in Pegasus, and he answered in the negative. I will go to The Red Lion later today and make some enquiries, but now even I am of the opinion that the key to the mystery is in London."

It gratified Elizabeth that Mr Darcy was according due consideration to her ideas. There was no hint of the condescension that she had feared when she mentioned her womanly intuitions. He was also readily sharing his own thoughts on the subject. Apart from her father and Uncle Gardiner, she had met very few men who were willing to treat the opinions of a mere woman at par with their own. Mr Darcy had just joined that very select category. It troubled her once again

that she had misjudged the man so badly.

She came out of her reverie to hear Mr Darcy asking her, "... and Mrs Webster has not heard anything further from the army about Jonathan?"

"No, nothing... However, she is confident that she will get the news as soon as there is any because a friend of Jonathan is responsible for the dispatches in the war office."

"Hmm... Richard might suggest something, but I am not sure when he will be back from his assignment. We will know more only when we reach London."

Elizabeth nodded and sat back with a smile. She felt strangely light and reassured now that she had shared her suspicions with Mr Darcy. Somehow she felt sure that he would do everything in his power to make things all right.

Darcy sat observing the beautiful smile playing on her face and felt a sudden desire to beg her to accord him one more chance. To request a courtship –

for her to get to know him better... but then he tamped it down firmly. *'It is too soon. She has only just begun to change her opinion of me. And how could I forget that she is under my protection at present - dependent on me for her safe passage back home. It would not be gentlemanly to put any pressure on her under the circumstances. What if she wants to refuse but cannot, due to misplaced gratitude?'* His jaw clenched at the insupportable thought. *'No, it would be best to first safely accompany her to her relatives and then throw myself at her mercy.'* All of a sudden, he felt impatient to travel back to London. There was a lot that needed to be done before he could request another chance from Elizabeth.

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Chapter 10

It was only when they went to sit after a rousing game of 'hide and seek' that Darcy remembered Mrs Dawson's trunk he had brought back from The Red Lion yesterday. '*Something in her effects might shed some light on Millie's parentage,*' he thought.

"Elizabeth?"

"Yes?"

"Yesterday, we also brought back Mrs Dawson's belongings from The Red Lion. I did not bring them up to our room, but Martha would know where they are stored. Ah... whenever you feel well enough to do so, would you like to have a look at them? We might get a clue to Millie's identity."

"Oh! Of course, why did I not think of this before? I will do so as soon as we go back inside," Elizabeth exclaimed.

"There is no need for such a hurry, Elizabeth. Please do not overdo things, remember what Mr Talbot told you."

For a moment, Elizabeth felt aggrieved at being treated like a child. She opened her mouth to tell him so but gave up the idea after one glance at his concerned eyes. Instead, she said placatingly, "Although I feel as fit as a fiddle, I will take due care not to tire myself, I promise." To prevent further argument, she asked, "Regarding that letter to Charlotte, shall I send it to her from here?"

"If Cooper, the blacksmith, keeps his promise and you, ma'am, continue to feel like this fiddle that you just now mentioned," he quirked his brows at her and continued, "Then we can travel to London as early as tomorrow. Anyhow, latest by the day after. I believe it would be for the best if you send the letter from there. That way, you can choose what information you want to disclose in it." Darcy was talking about exercising caution as he was keen to quell

any possibility of rumours regarding them. He was determined to win Elizabeth through fair means, not by forcing her hand in any manner.

“Oh, I trust Charlotte completely...” Elizabeth began, then paused. “But then, I suppose you can never be too cautious in a situation like ours. I think you are right; I should send the letter from London,” she said after a while, as she finally took his meaning and called to mind the possible consequences if their sojourn at Bassingtonstoke became generally known. Their conversation was soon interrupted by the two children.

“Gran Pa will be wanting a hand with Pegasus, sir. I... I would like to go to him now,” Tom said diffidently.

“Of course, you should go to your grandfather if he needs you, Tom. You run along now, child,” Darcy replied with a smile. Once Tom had disappeared down the path to the stables, Millie caught hold of Elizabeth’s arm and said urgently, “Millie got to go.”

Darcy was thoroughly enjoying his time with Elizabeth in these beautiful surroundings and was justifiably reluctant for the picnic to end just yet. He smilingly replied to the little girl, “In a little while, poppet.”

“Millie go now,” the child replied, and to Darcy’s consternation, she seemed ready to burst into tears. “Uh...” He looked at Elizabeth in puzzlement, unable to understand the sudden change in the little girl’s disposition.

“Umm... Alex... I think Millie has to use the necessary^[iv], and I am afraid that we do not have enough time to go back to the house,” Elizabeth said wryly.

“Oh!” Darcy said as he flushed red. It should not have amused Elizabeth so much to see the suave man in front of her blushing like a schoolboy, but it did. Worse still was the satisfaction to see him doing so and consider it a reparation for the foolish manner she had embarrassed herself in front of him over that braiding incident. Ideally, she should have felt ashamed of her meanness, alas! She was not. Instead, she found herself rubbing it in as she got up to lead Millie away. “It would appear, sir, that *there are a few things about little*

girls that you do not remember after all those years!" She grinned at him cheekily as she and Millie walked past him without giving him a chance to reply. She was not sure of it, but she believed she heard him huff out an exasperated "Minx!"

When she and Millie came back after a visit behind a thick shrubbery, Elizabeth found Mr Darcy in the process of picking up the ball with which the children had been playing earlier. Millie immediately hurried forward. "Dawcy! Play ball with Millie."

Elizabeth once again noted the ease with which Millie had changed her preference from her to Mr Darcy. For a moment, it hurt a little, but then she saw the smile he gave the child as he gently threw the ball towards her. Elizabeth's heart gave an odd flip, and she came to a sudden halt as a realization pierced through her with a sharpness of an arrow. *'Why to blame Millie when I too would rush forward and follow him - even to the end of the world, if I was assured of the love and care that smile revealed,'* She thought as she hurriedly sat down on the rug, feeling shocked at her reckless thoughts and the depth of feelings they signalled! *'How... how could it have happened that in a span of two days I have gone and fallen in love with a man I so thoroughly disliked! It is impossible, really. Maybe it is a delayed reaction to that blow to my head. Perhaps I should ask Mr Talbot if he has heard of madness resulting from the kind of injury I sustained that day?'* She thought with a wry quirk to her lips, then lowered her head on her knees in despair. She might try and tell herself it was madness afflicting her. She might also pretend that it was just infatuation resulting from a strange mixture of proximity and gratitude. Unfortunately, her heart told her differently. *'Oh, Lord! How could I have been so stupid!'* She groaned inwardly.

"Elizabeth?" "Beth?"

She raised her head on hearing both voices simultaneously and encountered two pairs of concerned eyes peering down at her.

"What is it, Elizabeth? Are you unwell?" Darcy asked worriedly.

"No... no... Alex, I am..."

"I should never have agreed to this picnic!"

“Alex, it is...”

“I knew it would be too much in your condition. I...”

“Alex!” Elizabeth interrupted sharply, and Darcy paused and looked at her in surprise.

“I am well, truly. It is just that I am feeling the beginning of a headache.”

“Then we should go back now, and you should take rest.”

Feeling the need to be alone for a while to make sense of her momentous discovery, Elizabeth nodded mutely. Relieved to have her agree to the suggestion without argument, Darcy held out his hand. “Come, then.” The child in his arms immediately parroted the action and the words. “Come, Beth”

Elizabeth smiled involuntarily at that, gently caught both the hands being offered in support, and got up. “Thank you, Alex, Millie sweetheart,” She offered an exaggerated curtesy to both her self-appointed saviours, then asked, “Shall we?”

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Mr Darcy had agreed to go and talk to Jones only after he had extracted a promise from her that she would try and sleep. And she did try, but with the thoughts churning in her mind, it was difficult even to lie down, let alone sleep. Realizing that it was a lost battle, Elizabeth got up and went to sit on the couch by the window. She looked out and saw him riding away on Poseidon.

*‘I really cannot be in love with him, can I?’* she asked herself and closed her eyes in agitation. Suddenly, myriad images of the last couple of days started passing through her mind in quick succession. Mr Darcy crooning to Millie, Mr Darcy cajoling Millie out of the carriage, Mr Darcy teasing *her* out of her sulks to eat the broth, Mr Darcy hurrying out of the room to give her privacy, Mr Darcy reassuring Mrs Webster about Pegasus, Mr Darcy setting back Smith’s shoulder, Mr Darcy laughing with John, Mr Darcy... Alex... carrying her upstairs in his arms... and her eyes sprang open as she once again experienced the



strong pull of attraction she had felt that very first day. “How could I *not* love him?” she whispered as she leaned her forehead on the window glass and closed her eyes once again. The cool glass soothed her anxiety, but only for a little while as an annoying inner voice sarcastically asked soon enough. “Have you forgotten, Lizzy Bennet, that it is not even a week since you told ‘Alex’ that he was the last man on earth you would ever be prevailed upon to marry? Have you?”

“But that man was not Alex.”

“Ha! Just listen to yourself! Have you really gone mad? And what of the reasons you disliked Alex... Er... *Mr Darcy*?”

Elizabeth opened her eyes and stared out of the window unseeingly. “Yes... what about the reasons for my dislike ... *earlier* dislike of him?” she asked herself, knowing full well that she no longer disliked him. She settled back on the couch and once again went over their acrimonious exchange on the day he had proposed to her - his insulting words and her own angry tirade about the injustice meted out to Mr Wickham and her gentle, sweet Jane. Now, as she thought about it all once more, one thing she was very sure of – the man she had come to know in the last few days *could not* have cheated anyone out of their inheritance. Either there was a justifiable reason to deny Mr Wickham the living, or there was some misunderstanding between the two men. She truly *wanted* it to be the latter but had a lowering suspicion that it was the former, and that... Mr Wickham had deliberately lied to her for reasons best known to him. Once she came to the conclusion, she decided to think no more about it.

But then, what about Jane and Mr Bingley? On that fateful day, Mr Darcy had proudly claimed that what he had done had been in the service of his friend. That he had been kinder to Mr Bingley than he had been to himself! Once again, she felt the stirrings of anger which she immediately tried to tamp down... to allow herself to think without letting her anger run away with her. ‘*Oh Lord, where has this love brought me – I am now trying to find justification for his hateful meddling!*’ she thought in amazement. ‘*Even if it all was in the service of*

*a friend, what right had he, to interfere in such a personal matter of a friend? Would I ever presume to advise even someone as close as Charlotte in matters pertaining to her marriage...*' Elizabeth's eyes widened as she suddenly recollected her first words to Charlotte when she had informed her about her engagement to Mr Collins. "*Engaged to Mr Collins! my dear Charlotte- impossible!*" Only the realization that Charlotte would not appreciate any further remonstrances from her on the matter had made her pretend to be happy for her friend. '*What if Charlotte had come to me for advice before her engagement?*' Elizabeth thought, then closed her eyes in mortification, knowing full well what her advice would have been. Suddenly feeling too anxious to sit still, she got up and started to pace. In her agitation, she did not look where she was going and collided with the small table holding Mr Darcy's valise. She jumped forward to catch hold of it but failed. She watched in horrified fascination as some of the contents of the valise fell out. There was a handkerchief, few cravats, and a book. As she bent to pick up the items, she saw that a few sheets of folded paper had fallen out of the book. She reached out a hand towards them then froze. It appeared to be a letter - addressed to Miss Elizabeth Bennet!

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Chapter 11

Elizabeth picked up the letter with a hand that shook slightly. All other items that had fallen out from the valise lay on the floor, forgotten. She examined the letter carefully. The seal was broken, and the creases on the sheets revealed that they had been folded and unfolded many times. *'Shall I read it? After all, the letter is addressed to me,'* she told herself a little conveniently.

"But it was never given to you, was it? If he had wanted you to read it, don't you think Mr Darcy would have somehow managed to pass it on to you in the last few days." Elizabeth huffed irritably and opened the letter, purposely ignoring the annoying inner voice. The letter was dated from Rosings on the very same day of his proposal to her! Her eyes slid to the salutation and widened as she read. *'Be not alarmed, Madam, on receiving this letter, by the apprehension of its containing any repetition of those sentiments, or renewal of those offers, which were last night so disgusting to you.'*

Elizabeth closed her eyes in mortification. *'Clearly, his intentions have changed, and who could blame him after the cruel manner in which I refused his suit,'* she thought, experiencing a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. She hurriedly folded the letter and went back to stare out of the window. Suddenly, feeling quite reluctant to find out what Mr Darcy had written to her in the letter. *'Do I truly want to read this?'* she asked herself even as her eyes involuntarily strayed back to the closely written sheets in her hand. *'Well, my girl, you were daring enough to hurl accusations at him. It is only fair that you now be brave enough to read what he has to say in response.'* She squared her shoulders determinedly, sat back on the couch and once more unfolded the letter.

Elizabeth had been to a seaside town only once in her life. When she had been about ten or eleven, she and Jane had gone to Brighton

with their Uncle and Aunt Gardiner. One day while they had been enjoying a visit to the beach, the weather, and the sea both had turned nasty all of a sudden. She remembered that she had been sitting on the rocky beach with her back to the sea, searching for some intricately coloured pebbles from the thousands spread before her. She had been so involved in the activity that she failed to hear the warning her uncle had shouted. It was only after she had been completely drenched by a violent, incoming wave that her uncle picked her up from the ground and took her to safety. Even after all those years, she had not forgotten the shock and distress she experienced when the cold water crashed all over her so unexpectedly. Now, as she read and reread the letter in her hand, the whole gamut of emotions that kept hitting her made her feel exactly like that—shocked and distressed.

Mr Darcy had started the letter by explaining his role in separating Jane and Mr Bingley. As she read, she tried to summon up anger at him for his high-handed behaviour, to rail at his presumption to sit in judgement of her sister's feelings or their lack, but her heart was not in it. It might have worked had she still been under the misconception that he was a disdainful snob who looked down on those he considered his inferior. However, she had seen him interact with so many people in the last few days. None were his equal in rank and status, but he had treated them all with kindness and consideration. How could she blame everything on him when it was her family's uncontrolled behaviour that had cost Jane her happiness. She closed her eyes in despair, and the disjointed words from the letter danced in front of her eyes. *'The situation of your mother's family, though objectionable was nothing in comparison of that total want of propriety, so frequently, so almost uniformly betrayed by herself, your three younger sisters, and occasionally even by your father.... from what passed that evening my opinion of all parties was confirmed, and every inducement heightened, which could have led me before to preserve my friend from what I esteemed a most unhappy connection.'*

She remembered the night of the ball at Netherfield that he mentioned in the letter, and a hot flush of shame darkened her face. She loved

her family, but even she had felt utterly humiliated by their behaviour that night. Lydia's and Kitty's wild conduct, her mother's vulgar assertions about an imminent engagement between Jane and Mr Bingley, Mary's tasteless exhibition, and their father's humiliation of her sister all played out in front of her eyes, and she shuddered. How could she blame *him* if such behaviour gave him a disgust for their family and rendered a connection with them unpalatable? Especially when he believed that Jane's affections were not engaged. Had she been in his place and seen what he did, believed what he did, she might also have advised a word of caution to Mr Bingley! She shook her head as her heart filled with sadness. She might continue to blame Mr Darcy for his interference in the affair, but fairness demanded it of her to lay the blame where most of it was due. Her family's improper conduct and Mr Bingley's lack of self-belief were more to blame for Jane's broken heart than anything else. After all, Mr Bingley was the one who had spent so much time with Jane. If *he* did not have the courage of his convictions, how could she put the blame on Mr Darcy for offering advice as he deemed fit? Although, it continued to hurt - a lot - that a straightforward man like him had employed subterfuge to keep Jane and Mr Bingley apart in London. But then, she remembered that two days ago, he had not hesitated to employ deception when he had felt the need to protect *her*. What would he not do for Mr Bingley, who was his dearest friend?

"Especially if protecting Mr Bingley also helped to protect his own beleaguered heart!" The voice chirped slyly, and once again, Elizabeth could not deny the sense in what it implied. He had himself confessed that he had struggled – in vain to fight his attraction. Tiredly, she leaned back on the couch and closed her eyes – '*if only...*' she thought, releasing a deep breath. If only her family members had behaved with more decorum. If only Jane had been more open with her feelings. If only she had been less prejudiced and if only Mr Darcy had been as empathetic as he had shown himself to be so recently.

Suddenly, she opened her eyes in puzzlement as she tried to reconcile the Mr Darcy she had met in Meryton to the Alex she had fallen in love with here. Her mind flew back to their first meeting at the

Meryton assembly. She recollected that he had appeared aloof and uncomfortable even as he entered the assembly, which was quickly abuzz about his noble mien, ten thousand pounds per annum, and purported ownership of half of Derbyshire. *‘Oh! Of course, how else would a man, recently heartsore from the treacherous and mercenary actions of a supposed ‘childhood friend’ react to avaricious discussions about himself and his friend, if not by disdain?’* she asked herself. She could not be sure, but she believed that she had found the reason for Mr Darcy’s strangely contrary conduct in the Meryton assembly. Unfortunately, things had only gone downhill from there. The aggressive matchmaking efforts of the matrons of Meryton led by her mother, Mr Wickham’s insidious lies about Mr Darcy and her own initial dislike of him, together, all had ensured that neither she nor he behaved at their best during their acquaintance in Meryton.

Thinking of Mr Wickham once again caused a wave of shock to pass through her. She had already known in her heart that there was something wrong with his story. However, she had never imagined that it was a complete, malicious falsehood. *‘What a vile man! Poor Miss Darcy! Now, what Mr Darcy had spoken about her in the morning made sense. It seems she has still not come to terms with that rake’s machinations.’* Elizabeth mused compassionately. *‘But how could I allow that... man to feed me such lies. How could I believe his claims without once considering the contradiction between his words and his actions? Never realizing the incongruity of him sharing such intimate details with a near stranger. Since when have I become such a poor judge of character?’* she asked herself in distress.

“Ever since you heard that hurtful comment about your tolerable appearance!” The pesky inner voice was back and was annoyingly correct as usual. Elizabeth had to agree that the comment had hurt more than just her vanity.

“But since then, Mr Darcy has obviously changed his tune somewhat! After all, he found you more than handsome enough to tempt him to consider leg-shackling^[v] himself to you!” the voice continued, and Elizabeth’s lips quirked up in a smile as she acknowledged the truth of that. The smile soon faded as she recalled his salutation from the

letter. *'But he has changed his mind now... anyone would do so if they were repulsed in the manner I rejected his proposal,'* she thought forlornly. *'But, he has been so kind to me ever since he came to our rescue on the day of the accident. Not once has he shown any resentment for my behaviour. Maybe...'* Hope flared a little in her heart.

"Well, he has been equally caring of Mrs Webster, John and Mr Smith. Is it your contention that he plans to offer marriage to any or all of them?" The voice was at its annoying best.

"Oh, be quiet... you!" Elizabeth burst out in irritation, but she could not deny the validity of the argument. Had it been *Mr Darcy* who had been so considerate of her, she would have had a reason to hope, but Alex... had shown himself to be an intrinsically kind man. No, she could not consider his kindness as a sign of his partiality.

It was ironic, really. Two days ago, when she had gained consciousness literally in his arms, she had believed herself to be in a nightmare! Presently, she would consider the exact same thing as the very substance of her dreams. However, now that they were in danger of remaining only dreams, the pain she felt at the thought was astonishing. How such a shift had happened in two short days, she did not know. Somehow, it had happened, and she found herself helpless to undo it. Before she had read his letter, she believed that she had fallen in love with Alex, the kind and charming man she met on the day of her accident. Now, however, she understood that though she might *like* Alex better, she was in love with *Fitzwilliam Alexander Darcy*. That flawed but worthy man, who was a strange mixture of aloofness, empathy, pride, and generosity of spirit. The most upright and the best of men she knew and now wanted for her very own. She pressed her hand to her mouth, realizing the futility of her altered wishes. As things had stood then, she could not regret refusing him that day in the parsonage, but she did regret the vitriol with which she had done so. More than that, she regretted that she came to know of his goodness only after slamming the door shut on her happiness.

Mr Darcy had said that they could travel to London as early as tomorrow, and then... they would go their separate ways. *'Oh Lord!, I*

am not ready for that just yet. Could we not stay here for a while longer - Alex, Millie and I - as the loving family we are pretending to be! The wild and futile nature of her thoughts distressed her suddenly. *'Get a hold on yourself, Lizzy. Some things are just not meant to be. Rather than mooning in this revolting manner, it would be much better if you do something useful... like searching for the clues for Millie's identity.'*

She folded the letter, picked up the rest of Mr Darcy's things from the floor and put everything back in his valise. Then, feeling too agitated to ring the bell for Martha and wait in the room, she went out in search of her.

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Darcy handed over the reins of Poseidon to John and started on his way to the farmhouse. He felt quite satisfied with his visit to The Red Lion. Security for Pegasus had been reasonably arranged. Jones had been happy to offer him a man who would, starting tonight, undertake to guard Pegasus during the nights. As far his enquiries about Pegasus were concerned, they went on the expected lines. Jones had corroborated what John had told him previously. Except for the squire, Mr Mathews, no one in Bassingtonstoke had the resources to purchase Pegasus, and according to the innkeeper, the squire would never stoop down to orchestrate the attacks that had happened on the farmhouse. Moreover, had Mr Mathews so desired, he already had a legitimate reason to ask for Pegasus in lieu of the loan he had offered to the Websters. It appeared that his enquiries in Bassingtonstoke had reached a dead end. If he wanted to continue the investigations, he would need to do so in London.

While at the inn, Darcy had also met with Smith. The coachman had informed him that their carriage would be ready for travel on the morrow if they were willing to commence the journey in the early afternoon. It suited Darcy. The journey to the metropolis was less than two hours. Even with a small break for Elizabeth's and Millie's comfort, they would be home much before it became dark. Now, he was really impatient to reach London, transport Elizabeth to her



relative's place and then begin his courtship in earnest. That is if she agreed to his request!

Eager to share his news with Elizabeth, he hurried inside the house and almost collided with her as she came out of a small room next to Mrs Webster's parlour.

"Careful!" He steadied her as she stumbled in an attempt to protect the objects in her arm from falling.

"I am sorry, I was not paying attention to where I was going."

"There is no need to apologise, Elizabeth, but what are you doing out here? You promised me that you would rest for a while."

"I did try, sir. However, my mind was too active to allow me to rest. I kept thinking about exploring the contents of Mrs Dawson's trunk and wondering if we would find something that would point us to Millie's family. After a while, things came to such a pass that I just had to come down and begin the search," Elizabeth replied, revealing only a tiny portion of her anxious musings.

Something in her expression discouraged Darcy from making any further issue about the matter. Instead, he asked, "So, did you find something helpful in the trunk?"

"I did find a few things that are Millie's legacy and would certainly be important to her as she grows older. However, I am not sure how helpful they are from our perspective."

When Darcy raised his brow enquiringly, she replied. "I found a family Bible, a small locket in a gold chain, and a scrap of paper with the address of a Mrs Catherine Basset, who stays in London." She held out the objects in her hand towards him as she spoke.

"I believe Mrs Basset was the friend with whom Mrs Dawson was planning to stay while she searched for Millie's father," Elizabeth continued softly so as not to be overheard.

Darcy nodded absently, as he examined the Bible and the piece of paper. He then looked up at her, "Umm.. you also mentioned a locket?"

"Oh, of course! Elizabeth exclaimed as she took out a locket hanging

from a thin gold chain from the pocket of her gown. "I am not a great judge of these things, but I believe that there is a lot of difference in the quality of the chain and that of the locket," she added as she held it out to him.

"Yes, although small, the locket does look like a family heirloom." Darcy nodded and caught hold of the chain but immediately dropped it in surprise at the sudden cry of, "Mama locket!" from the doorway of the parlour. Before either of them could react, Millie picked up the locket and hugged it to herself. "Mama," she said again, fervently.

Elizabeth and Darcy exchanged a quick glance, then Elizabeth got down on her knees beside the child. "How beautiful! Is it Millie's?" she asked as she touched the locket gently. The little girl shook her head. "Mama," she repeated like a prayer, and the way her hands tightened on the chain told Elizabeth that it would not be easy to get her to part from it.

"Shall I put it on for you?" she asked gently.

Millie nodded vigorously and presented the chain to Elizabeth, who dutifully slipped it over the child's head. The delighted smile Millie offered her in response tugged at Elizabeth's heart, and she caught the little girl to herself.

As she got up with the child in her arms, Darcy cleared his throat. "Come, we will be more comfortable in the parlour," he said gruffly.

"Ah, so Millie did find you both. We heard some voices in here, and the child was quite eager to find her Dorsey and Beth." Mrs Webster smiled at them.

"Yes, we were standing not too far from the door." Darcy nodded as he went to sit next to her.

"Mrs Webster, I now have an agreement with Jones regarding Pegasus's security." As the old lady raised her brow in enquiry, he proceeded to share the details with her.

Mrs Webster nodded once he had finished. "Mr Fitzwilliam, I am truly grateful to you for all you have done for us and hope that you will be back here soon with that mare of yours."

Darcy smiled and shook his head. "If anyone has to be grateful, then it's I and my family who are grateful to you for taking us in when we needed and bestowing so much care on us. As far as our next visit is concerned, I am sure that Georgie would not let me wait any more than is logistically necessary. It would not be long before we are at your doorstep once again!"

"And you will be most welcome."

On that note of goodwill, both Mrs Webster and Darcy turned towards Elizabeth. They found her gently rocking Millie in her arms. For a long moment, Darcy just stared at the precious image, then with a sigh, he asked softly, "Is she asleep?" When Elizabeth nodded, he got up and went to her. "I will carry her to the room, and I will suggest that you also take rest for a while, Elizabeth."

"He is right, Elizabeth. Mr Talbot was quite particular in his advice for you. If he comes to know that contrary to his instructions you have been up and about since morning, he will have my head."

Realizing the good sense in what Mrs Webster said, Elizabeth got up with a smile, and she and Darcy took their leave of their hostess.

As they entered their chamber, Elizabeth brought up the subject of the locket once again. "I tried to see if there was a miniature in it that might offer us a clue, but I could not find a mechanism to open it," she informed Darcy.

"Hmm... maybe it does not have one. I will have a look at it, and if required, we can also ask a jeweller to examine it," Darcy said as he gently put Millie to bed.

Elizabeth nodded, then asked about his enquiries at The Red Lion. Darcy gave her a quick summary. "Then the only course of action left to us is to investigate Cyril Webster," Elizabeth said thoughtfully.

Darcy knew that it was just a figure of speech, but that 'us' still gladdened his heart. "Yes, I am planning to visit Mr Sandiford's warehouse the day after the morrow." When Elizabeth looked at him in puzzlement, he shook his head ruefully. "Oh, I forgot to mention that I also met Smith at the inn. Our carriage will be ready by

tomorrow morning. We can leave in the afternoon if we so wish.”

She had been expecting the news. Before leaving for The Red Lion, he had already informed her about the possibilities. Still, the information came as a shock. All her hopes of having a few more days with him and Millie in the idyllic setup of Mrs Webster’s home had suddenly gone up in smoke, and it hurt. It felt still more hurtful that he seemed quite happy to leave this place.

“You seem very eager to shake the dust off this place, sir,” she began sharply. “But I think I can understand. Anyone who has the responsibility of an unrelated female and a child thrust on them so unceremoniously would be eager to get rid of it as soon as possible.” She had tried to continue more neutrally, but despite her best efforts, the hurt she was feeling came out in the bitterness of her voice.

“Elizabeth?” Darcy asked tentatively. “What is it? Are you not feeling well? Of course, we will not travel tomorrow if you are not feeling well enough to do so.”

Elizabeth looked into his dark eyes, and his confusion and worry were plainly visible in them. Suddenly she felt very ashamed of her petulance. He had been kind to her and Millie beyond expectations, at quite a lot of expense and trouble to himself. Despite the fact that he had all the reasons to resent her, he had never once shown it in his behaviour or actions. Now, just because she had discovered that she was in love with him and... and wanted to... to stay here continuing to live this charade, that was no reason to throw tantrums if he did not have similar wishes!

“Please do not worry, Alex, I am well. It is just that I am feeling a bit overwhelmed with all that I have discovered today,” she said contritely and truthfully. “But I... I believe that I would be as fit as that fiddle as soon as I take this rest that you all have been advising me.” She tried a weak jest and was pleased to see his expression lighten.

“Of course, I understand. Even I found Mrs Webster’s story quite overwhelming, but please do not fret, Elizabeth. We will try and help the kind lady as best as we can. Now please rest,” he admonished with

a smile. Then raised his hand to tuck an errant curl that had escaped from its confines behind her ears. "I will see you later." He bowed and left swiftly. The affectionate gesture had come so naturally to him that he had not even noticed it. However, she did, and her heart hammered against her ribs, as confusion and hope warred for supremacy within.

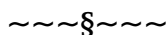
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Chapter 12

As a child, every time Elizabeth was to return to Longbourn from a visit to her Uncle Gardiner's home, she used to wish that their journey would be postponed for a few days. The night before the journey, she would fervently pray for an impediment such as the carriage horse throwing a shoe or the like! Presently she had believed that those days of childish antics were long past her. As it turned out, she had been wrong! That night when she went to sleep, she did so with an ardent wish that Mr Cooper be unable to deliver the repaired carriage in time for their travel tomorrow. (Of course, with due apologies to Mr Cooper for any loss of face he might have to incur for the same.) Unfortunately, her prayers had rarely been answered when she was a child, and they were not answered now.

The next morning Mr Darcy got a missive from Smith confirming that the carriage would be ready for their afternoon journey. So it was that, after a light luncheon, Elizabeth found herself mounting the steps of the carriage that Smith had brought very punctually to the farmhouse. She had assumed that Mr Darcy would be travelling with her and Millie in the carriage. However, after the last-minute leave-taking from Mrs Webster, he mounted Poseidon and the next moment, they were off. Elizabeth waved to the old lady from the window and continued to watch the farmhouse and their hostess until the carriage took a turn and they were no longer visible. Elizabeth sat back with a sigh. Mrs Webster had urged her to come back with Mr Darcy when he brought Snowdrop to Bassingtonstoke next month. She had not wanted to continue telling lies to the good lady. So, she had smiled and replied with an answer which, while being noncommittal, was entirely correct. "I would love to, Mrs Webster." The response had pleased the old lady but saddened Elizabeth as she knew that she would not be meeting their kind hostess again.

To take her mind off her maudlin thoughts, she turned towards Millie. The little girl was eagerly staring out of the carriage window, chattering happily to herself. *‘For someone who is petrified of horses, the poppet sure appears fond of a carriage ride.’* Elizabeth smiled. “Really, it is a relief given how her previous one ended,” she muttered, and her smile faded as she remembered the accident and its aftermath. *‘Poor Mrs Dawson! Put to rest in this strange place in a ceremony attended by strangers. Her only surviving kin could not even bid a final farewell to her grandmother because she is too young to be told the truth.’* Elizabeth blinked rapidly to dispel the tears that pricked her eyes and hurriedly turned to look out of the window on the other side. She was puzzled to note that instead of taking the road out of the village, they were travelling in the opposite direction. She leaned forward to peer ahead just in time to observe Mr Darcy and Poseidon disappearing inside the large gates of the church.



Elizabeth read the first two lines of the inscription on the headstone – *‘In memory of Lilian Dawson, beloved mother and grandmother...’* Although she felt near to bursting with emotions, the first question that popped into her mind was an inconsequential one. *‘How did Mr Darcy know Mrs Dawson’s given name?’* she mused as she turned to look at him. He was standing to her right, holding Millie’s hand as the child looked around her curiously. Someone must have visited the grave next to Mrs Dawson’s recently because fresh flowers were adorning it.

“Dawcy, no flowers.” Millie pointed towards her grandmother’s grave.

“Hmm... you are right, poppet. Do you want us to put some flowers here?” Darcy asked her, and at her nod, brought out a small posey of red Peonies from the pocket of his greatcoat.

“Here you are... go ahead and put them there,” he said, handing out the flowers to Millie. The girl took them from him and then leant forward to place them on the grave.

“Good girl,” Darcy murmured as he caught hold of her hand once again.

Elizabeth bid her own goodbye to Mrs Dawson. Feeling a little overwhelmed with emotions, she promised the old lady that she would try her best to look after Millie's welfare.

Soon they were on their way back. Asking Smith to accompany the ladies to the carriage, Darcy went to bid farewell to the vicar.

"I could not ask you earlier, but I hope you are fully recovered now, Mr Smith."

"I am very well, Miss Bennet, and it is good to see you looking so much better since I saw you last." Smith smiled at her as he picked up Millie and helped her inside the carriage.

Elizabeth accepted the hand he offered in support and made to enter the carriage. "Frankly, I was quite worried for you when I saw the condition of the carriage after the accident. Now, I can only commend the blacksmith here in Bassingtonstoke who did such a fabulous job of repairing it," she said with a smile.

Ever since Mr Darcy had offered him the loan for the repair work, Smith had been racking his brains to find a way to repay the kindness. Finally, he had the chance to do a good turn to the man! From what he had understood, Miss Bennet was not very kindly disposed towards Mr Darcy. Telling her about the man's big-heartedness could only improve her opinion of him. With that aim in mind, Smith replied, "I cannot but agree with you on Mr Cooper's competence, ma'am. However, my carriage would have been a broken pile still had Mr Darcy not offered me a loan when he did to get it repaired."

At the coachman's words, Elizabeth froze for an instant, then continued forward with a sigh. "I must say it was kind of Mr Darcy to do so, but then he is a kind man."

"Aye, that he is." Feeling quite pleased with himself for a job well done, Smith closed the carriage door after Miss Bennet and then went to take his seat.

Elizabeth sat down next to Millie. Then for the umpteenth time since yesterday, she remembered Miss de Bourgh's comment about misleading first impressions. Fortunately, before she could ponder any

further over the same fruitless thoughts, the door of the carriage opened. Mr Darcy entered the carriage, settled himself on the opposite seat and then rapped the roof to signal Smith to begin the journey.

“You appear quite surprised to see me, Elizabeth?” While there was no longer any need for pretence and to call Elizabeth by her given name, Darcy was not keen to give up the privilege just yet.

Elizabeth could not really tell him how pleasant the surprise had been to her so, she replied noncommittally, “Er... you started the journey on Poseidon, so I just assumed that you would be continuing in the same manner.”

“I thought it would be easier to lead the way to the church instead of giving directions to Smith. Moreover, I wanted to break it gently to Poseidon that he would be travelling to London tied behind a strange carriage.” He grinned at the comical look Elizabeth threw him. However, she replied seriously enough, “I suppose you know your horse best.”

For a while, there was silence in the carriage. For some reason, even Millie had stopped her happy prattling. Elizabeth looked towards her in concern, but to her relief, she found that it was because the child was drowsy. She was trying to keep herself awake by staring out of the window in what looked to be a losing battle. It was not too long before Millie nodded off, and Elizabeth pulled the child towards herself protectively.

“Alex?”

“Hmm?” Darcy raised his brow at her enquiringly.

“Thank you for... for taking Millie and me to the churchyard today. I was remembering Mrs Dawson as we left the farmhouse and felt dreadful that Millie and I had not even paid our last respects to her.”

Darcy sighed deeply. “I can easily understand your feelings because that is how I felt on the day of the funeral. No thanks are expected for something that just had to be done,” he replied. Seeing the embarrassed expression on his face, Elizabeth decided against persisting with the topic. Instead, she asked him, “How did you know

that Mrs Dawson's given name was Lilian?"

"I think you know that Smith's sister was a dear friend of Mrs Dawson. It seems she had shared quite a bit of information about Mrs Dawson with her brother," Darcy replied. "Although nothing relevant about Millie, I am sorry to say," he added promptly as he saw Elizabeth leaning forward eagerly.

"Oh!" Elizabeth sat back with a shake of her head.

"Ah... Elizabeth, you will be going to your uncle's place near Cheapside, won't you?"

"Yes, I will be staying with my Uncle Gardiner, who resides at Gracechurch Street."

"He is Mrs Bennet's brother?"

"Yes." Elizabeth nodded, then almost involuntarily found herself adding, "The one in trade."

Darcy flushed at her statement, remembering with regret his insults to her on the day of the proposal. He wanted to apologise to her and opened his mouth to do so. However, as he stared into her eyes, he discovered to his dismay that under certain circumstances, he was quite a coward. He found that he had no stomach to bring up that unpleasant episode and see her beautiful eyes fire once more with dislike and derision. Cravenly, he compromised by revealing his change of heart to her instead. "I would be very pleased to make his acquaintance," he said as he looked earnestly into her eyes.

Feeling quite surprised at his sudden change of heart regarding her family, Elizabeth gave him a long searching glance. Something in his expression must have conveyed his sincerity because suddenly, she smiled at him. "I also believe so, sir, but I think the person you would enjoy meeting just a tiny bit more is my Aunt Gardiner."

Unable to comprehend her meaning, Darcy raised a puzzled brow.

"I say this because my aunt belongs to your county of Derbyshire."

"Really? Do you know exactly where she used to live?"

"Yes, in a small village called Lambton. Her father used to own a

bookshop in the village.”

“But... Lambton is not even five miles from Pemberley!” Darcy exclaimed. “A bookshop, you say... let me see... by any chance your aunt’s maiden name happens to be Bainbridge? Umm... Marilyn Bainbridge?”

“It’s Madeline. Before her marriage to my uncle, she was indeed Madeline Bainbridge.”

“Hmm... When I was a young boy, I was quite a regular visitor to Mr Bainbridge’s shop. Now, I remember that a few times I also met your aunt there in the shop. I only have a few vague memories of that time. However, I do remember very clearly that Miss Bainbridge once offered me the best lemon cake that I have ever tasted in my life!”

“Well, I have no difficulty in believing that, sir. My aunt’s lemon cakes do happen to be quite famous in our family.” Elizabeth grinned at him.

“Then, it seems you had the right of it, Elizabeth. I am certainly going to like meeting your aunt just a very tiny bit more.” Darcy nodded, mock seriously.

They continued to banter in this jocular vein for some time, each feeling secretly pleased with the ever-increasing ease of their interactions. In Elizabeth’s case, the pleasure was tinged with sorrow at their impending separation. Soon, however, Smith brought the carriage to a halt in the courtyard of The Fox and The Hound. Darcy got down quickly and then assisted Elizabeth. “I will bring in Millie,” he told her when he noticed that the little one was still asleep.

To protect Elizabeth’s good name, he had decided to avoid the inn he usually frequented. It was the first time he was patronizing this particular inn and was understandably concerned about the quality of service. However, when he entered the inn, he was pleased to note that the surroundings were clean and hygienic, the patrons mostly appeared respectable, and the innkeeper was neatly dressed. Breathing in a sigh of relief, he requested a private parlour from the innkeeper.

“I am that sorry, your honour, but my private parlour is already

taken,” the innkeeper replied regretfully. “However, there is an empty table near the rear window, which is all nice and quiet. There ye and your lovely family can have your meal in comfort.”

Had he been travelling alone Darcy would have agreed to the innkeeper’s suggestion without a second thought. At present, however, he felt a little aggrieved at not being able to provide Elizabeth and Millie with even such a small luxury as having their meals in privacy. He opened his mouth, ready for an argument but was forestalled by the gentle press of Elizabeth’s hand on his arm.

“I am sure we will be very comfortable.” She smiled broadly at the innkeeper, who, as Darcy watched in irritated amazement, literally melted in front of his eyes.

“Please come, my lady. The table next to yours is just being vacated. I will make sure that it remains unoccupied until ye have had your meal.” The innkeeper bowed low and then gestured for them to follow him.

As Darcy trailed behind the duo in front of him with the innkeeper talking continuously to a smiling Elizabeth, he found himself revising his opinion of the innkeeper at least. *‘What a simpering idiot! If he had a tail, I am sure he would be wagging it furiously,’* he thought irritably. Luckily for him, Millie woke up just then and distracted him from his aggravating thoughts. “Cake, Dawcy!” The little girl pointed to a boy shovelling a big piece of cake in his mouth.

Darcy caught hold of her hand and kissed it. “Yes... yes, poppet, we will get your favourite fruit cake presently. But please, do not point at the boy like that, sweetheart. He may not like it.”

Millie’s mouth opened in a surprised ‘O’. She looked at the boy then back at Darcy. “Do not point,” She repeated and once again rested her head on his shoulder.

Darcy pecked her on her head and murmured, “That’s my sweet girl!”

‘If only it were this easy to convince all the females in one’s life, every man would add a few more years to his life,’ he thought in amusement, his good humour fully restored. When he reached the table, Elizabeth was

already seated. The innkeeper bowed to them once again and then left with a mumbled, "The waitress would be here shortly, my lady."

Darcy lowered Millie next to Elizabeth, then proceeded to wrap Elizabeth's shawl around her that she had forgotten to carry in her hurry to get down from the carriage.

"Oooh... to be so young and lovely and be so adored!" As Elizabeth and Darcy turned in surprise towards the intruding voice, they found a stout, middle-aged matron with her teenaged companion on the point of leaving the table next to theirs. Elizabeth blushed as the woman waggled her eyebrows at her suggestively and added, "Make the most of it, dearie, 'cause when you get to my age..." she paused and lowered her voice delicately. "... and size," the mischievous expression in her eyes belied the doleful shake of her head as she continued, "Then you are expected to carry your own things whether it's the shawl or the coal-scuttle."

"I am right, ain't I?" the lady addressed Darcy playfully. Elizabeth observed his stiffening stance curiously. It seemed imminent that Mr Darcy from Meryton was about to make an entry. In the past few days, she had understood that it was the display of encroaching vulgarity that set his back up. She waited with bated breath, expecting him to skewer the woman with an icy look of disdain. To her shock, she saw a sudden lightening of his expression as he first glanced at her then back at the matron.

"I am afraid I cannot agree with you there, madam. Because I know that men, young and old, would forever be eager to carry things for someone as charming as you," Darcy replied with a smile.

Elizabeth watched incredulously as the lady and her young companion both giggled girlishly. "Oh, get on with you, young man!" The lady blushed with pleasure, then addressed Elizabeth, "You have got quite a charming rogue there, dearie, be careful with him!" With that good-natured warning, the ladies took their leave. Elizabeth stared after the two giggling women, then glanced back at a still smiling Darcy. *'Whether one is six or sixty, it appears that no woman is immune to that smile,'* she thought, feeling inexplicably irked. Her irritation was quite

surprising given that she had dreaded the return of *Mr Darcy from Meryton*, who had very fortunately, failed to materialize.

“You need to be careful in future, Alex. For someone who claims to be a complete antithesis of Don Juan, you are giving quite a fair imitation of the *charming rogue*,” she told him sardonically.

At that, Darcy stared at her in surprise, then a sudden look of amusement crossed his face. Next, he leaned towards her a little and sniffed delicately. “I can smell something burning, Elizabeth. Can you?”

Puzzled, Elizabeth took a few deep breaths as she turned her face this way and that. “I can’t...” she began but abruptly stopped as she encountered his grinning countenance. All of a sudden, the actual meaning of his words struck her, and she looked away. ‘*The odious man is laughing at me, again! And he implied that I am jealous... the cad!*’ she thought angrily. She opened her mouth to tick him off for his presumption. Before she could let loose, however, the pesky inner voice was back – “And aren’t you?” it asked, and Elizabeth subsided despondently because, as always, Miss Pesky was right! She had been jealous – of those two women for being the recipient of his unfettered smiles. If she was honest with herself, a time or two, she had even felt jealous of little Millie! For being the sole focus of his care and attention. ‘*Oh, Lord! What has happened to you, Lizzy? How could you be so mean?*’ she mumbled to herself.

“Eh? What was that?” Darcy asked in confusion. She did not know what she would have answered in her agitation. Luckily for her, the waitress came to their table just then, and Mr Darcy got busy placing their order. He made the process quite involved with a lot of back and forth between them all for their preferences. By the time the waitress departed, Elizabeth had started feeling comfortable once more, and she decided to put the whole embarrassing episode behind her. Soon their talk turned to the commonplace once again.

It was when they were nearing the end of their meal that Darcy addressed her a little diffidently. “Ah... Elizabeth?”

“Yes?”

“I have a suggestion. You... you can always choose to ignore it... but still I would like to...” Elizabeth was puzzled to see him tying himself in knots all of a sudden, and she interrupted him quietly, “Please tell me your suggestion, Alex.”

“I do not know how much you want to reveal about the past few days to your uncle and aunt. If... if you do not want them to know when your carriage met with an accident or you want to suggest that I offered you a ride today itself, then I will support your claims. However, if you would like to make a clean breast of things, then I would suggest that you first come to Darcy House with me.” When she stared at him open-mouthed, he hurried to add, “It will all be above board Elizabeth, my sister and her companion, Mrs Annesley, also stay with me.”

Elizabeth impatiently waived that away, “I already know that Alex. What I want to understand is why do you think I should come to Darcy House?”

“Well, please try to think from your relations’ point of view. Today, I accompany you- a single woman with a small child, to their place. What do you think would be their reaction when next, you tell them that we have stayed together for days? That you have travelled alone with me several times?” Elizabeth knew that although her uncle was kind and broadminded, listening to the story in this fashion could only have one conclusion - Uncle Gardiner, insisting that Mr Darcy marry her to save her reputation.

“Well, that is what you want, don’t you? So, what are you waiting for? Let us rush to Gracechurch Street and tell the truth to Uncle and Aunt Gardiner,” Miss Pesky butted in as usual. *‘Oh, be gone, will you?’* Elizabeth told her silently and rubbed her palm on her face in agitation. It was true that now she desperately wanted Mr Darcy to renew his offer, but... not under compulsion! She knew that if her uncle asked it of him, he would do so in a trice. From their interactions in the past few days, she also knew that they would be happy with each other. *He* would ensure that they would be so, but her happiness would never be complete. She wanted to marry him,

but only if he also wanted the same.

She sighed and asked him, “How does the situation change if we first go to Darcy house?”

“It is more a matter of impression, I suppose. Once we reach there, we will invite Mr Gardiner to Darcy House. I believe the impact would be somewhat different if... if you tell the story to him in a house where my sister is also present with her companion. In fact, I believe I can further attempt to improve our situation. Let me see...” Darcy’s voice petered off as he appeared lost in contemplation.

Elizabeth pondered over his statement. She had to agree that she had a better chance of convincing her uncle that there was no imminent threat to her reputation if she told her story in Darcy house surrounded by other women. She sighed again and said, “I believe you are right, Alex.”

Darcy nodded and then got up. “Let me see if I can arrange what I want, Elizabeth. You and Millie wait here. I will be back in a few minutes.” Elizabeth watched him go, wondering about this mysterious mission of his.

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## Chapter 13

When Mr Darcy was not back after nearly a quarter of an hour, Millie started fretting after him.

“He will be back soon, sweetheart,” Elizabeth told her with a reassuring smile. In anticipation, her own gaze strayed to the door involuntarily, and she saw two men coming inside. From their attire, they appeared to be well to do townsfolk, although their manners left much to be desired. They were conversing in such loud voices that she could hear their speech even when they took their seats two tables to her right.

“I am telling you it could not have been Darcy, otherwise, he would have responded to your call. You were loud enough, Lonsdale! Anyway, the man was facing away from you, so how can you be so sure that it was him?” one of the men argued.

“Well, I spent three years with him in Cambridge! Anyhow, had you not dragged me away when you did, I would have gone over to him, and there would have been no need for this argument. If you quit jabbering for a moment, I can still go outside and check!” the man addressed as Lonsdale replied testily.

“Cambridge was quite some time ago, my friend. Either that man was not Darcy, or if he was, then from what I saw, he had no desire to acknowledge you just now. Also, while I agree that the man talking to the coachman had a similar build as Darcy’s, but... did you notice his Hessians<sup>[vi]</sup>?”

“His Hessians! For heaven’s sake, what have the man’s boots got to do with it?” Lonsdale exclaimed in irritation.

“Well, they looked as if the man had dunked them in mud, somehow scraped it off them and then polished them very amateurishly.

Frankly, the Darcy I know would not be seen dead in them!" Darcy was never to know that his desire to save an overworked John from some extra work would help prevent an embarrassing meeting. One he had already tried his best to avoid by pretending deafness!

"You don't say! Well then, you have the right of it Carstairs, that man could not have been Darcy." Lonsdale nodded sagely and then added, "The extra shine in Darcy's boots has been the cause of much envy among friends for a long time. I even asked my man to find out its secret from Darcy's valet, Banes. The cheeky man told James that it was a matter of skill, and some people just don't have it!" As Mr Carstairs laughed, Mr Lonsdale ended his tale of woe. "You may laugh, but I had to increase James' salary to pacify his exacerbated feelings!"

While Elizabeth was still trying to make sense of the peculiar conversation and the implication of the men's presence in the room, a young maid came quietly to her side. "Beg pardon, miss, I am Sarah. The master has sent me to accompany you and the little one outside."

"Umm... the master?" asked a puzzled Elizabeth, wondering what could the innkeeper want with her.

"Mr Fitzwilliam," the maid clarified, then added, "I will carry the little miss," as she bent to pick up little Millie, who fortunately did not complain about the sudden advent of a new face in their midst.

As they came out of the public room, Elizabeth was very surprised to be taken towards the backside of the inn. To her consternation, the maid started moving towards the exit quite rapidly. Worried, Elizabeth hurried after her. "Hey, why are you..." she began, but as she neared the door, she caught a glimpse of Darcy and felt instant relief.

"Ah, you all are here, excellent! Sarah, will you take Millie inside the carriage, please?" Darcy asked the maid as a surprised Elizabeth gaped first at him, then at the maid, who dutifully took Millie aboard the carriage.

"What is happening, Alex?" she asked Darcy.

"I will tell you everything, Elizabeth, but first, let us leave from here. I

do not know if you noticed the two men who just entered the public room, but we cannot afford for them to see you with me because...”

“... because they are your friends from Cambridge, and how could Mr Darcy of Pemberley be seen accompanying a simple country miss with no connections...” The shocked hurt in his eyes brought her to her senses soon enough. Along with it came the realization that she did not truly believe what she had accused him of. Realizing her mistake, she started to apologise. “Alex, I am...” but the damage was already done, and he interrupted her coldly. Earlier, inside the inn, she had worried about the re-emergence of Mr Darcy from Meryton, who luckily had not come to the fore. But that was then - the cold-eyed, incensed man staring at her *now* was at once very familiar and a stranger! And his reappearance, she realised with sorrow, was her fault.

“I did not think that I would need to spell it out to you, madam, what my *acquaintances* would think about *you and Millie* if you both were spotted together with me at a public inn? What would have been its consequences to your reputation and the choices available to you in future?” he asked, his voice soft but so frigid that Elizabeth shivered involuntarily.

“Well, you should be thankful - for I have not forgotten that less than a se’nnight ago how categorically you told me that I am the last man on this earth that you will ever be prevailed upon to marry! Far be it from me to take that choice away from you by any action of mine!” Elizabeth flinched at the biting sarcasm with which he threw her words back at her and could only stare at him wide-eyed. For a moment, he looked away from her, and as Elizabeth stared at him helplessly, it appeared to her that he looked tired and... somehow defeated. She opened her mouth once again, but before she could formulate an apology, he straightened and held out his hand to assist her onto the carriage. “Sarah will be with you as a chaperone when we reach Darcy House. When I wrote to my staff from Bassingtonstoke, I only told them that I was unavoidably detained, not the reason for it. While you owe your family the truth, you do not owe the same to mine. You can decide what you want to tell them and let

me know.” Darcy added, and then with a stiff bow, he stepped back from the carriage.

It was only as Elizabeth sat down and looked out of the carriage window that she noticed Darcy moving towards Poseidon, who was standing quietly next to an ostler.

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She sat back and closed her eyes. *‘How did it happen that I lost all control over my tongue... and my good sense? After all, I am not completely naïve. I am fully aware of the consequences of being discovered in Mr Darcy’s company in this manner! The kind of care he has taken with my reputation is something I would have expected of any person who called himself a ‘gentleman’. I should have expected it of him also, had I... had I not complicated everything by falling in love with him!’* This time Elizabeth did not require Miss Pesky’s help to acknowledge the truth. She could clearly see that he was trying to ensure that she was not forced into a situation that she had proclaimed as distasteful. The problem had arisen because the said situation was no longer distasteful to her. Also, to her way of thinking, his extreme circumspection confirmed her fears that he was not interested in renewing his offer. Earlier at the inn, she had virtuously told herself that she did not want to force him into anything. However, the confirmation of his... disinterest had hurt - and was the reason for her intemperate behaviour. She remembered Darcy’s pained expression as she had accused him – once again - of something he was not guilty of and groaned aloud. *‘I am so very sorry, Alex, for taking out the pain of my insecurities on you. For hurting you, all over again.’* As she was rendering this silent apology, she heard a worried voice asking urgently, “Miss? Are you hurt? Do you need something?”

Elizabeth’s hurriedly opened her eyes and found two pairs of eyes gazing at her worriedly from the opposite seat. In her agitation, she had completely forgotten about Millie and the maid Sarah!

“Er... no... no, there is nothing wrong. It is just that I have a slight headache,” Elizabeth replied, flustered. Sarah looked at the bandage

on her head and nodded in understanding. However, Millie continued to appear anxious.

“Come here, sweetheart,” Elizabeth called out to the child, holding out a hand to her. When Millie caught hold of it, Elizabeth immediately lifted her onto her lap. As she sat there, holding the little girl tightly to herself, it was difficult to tell exactly who was deriving greater comfort from the embrace. Elizabeth turned to look out of the window and saw Mr Darcy riding alongside. While she had known that this evening they would be going their separate ways, she had hoped to part with him as a friend. She had also hoped that she might meet him a time or two more to discuss Millie’s future, but now she was no longer sure of that. The only consolation she had was the conviction that he would still do his best for Millie. *‘He may not want to have anything more to do with me, but I need to apologise to him for my appalling conduct and unjust accusations. I hope I can get to do that before Uncle Gardiner comes to take me home,’* she thought as she closed her eyes once again and her arms tightened around Millie.

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It was past four o’clock when the carriage stopped in front of Darcy House in Berkeley Square. As Darcy handed Elizabeth down from the carriage, she looked up at the townhouse looming in front of her. It was a five-storied, corner house in a street consisting of a row of large townhouses. While it was by no means the largest house in the street, to Elizabeth’s inexperienced eyes it was very elegant and well proportioned. From what she could make out, there was also an L shaped private garden running from the side of the house to its back. By the time she had finished her hurried inspection, a footman had assisted Sarah and Millie down from the carriage and the butler was waiting on the front step to welcome them.

“Higgins, will you kindly see to it that Smith here gets some refreshments before he goes away?”

“Of course, sir.” Higgins gave a stately nod, then gave some invisible indication to the footman, who asked Smith to follow him.

“Umm... Mr Darcy, sir, what about...” Smith began diffidently, but Darcy interrupted him. “Come and meet me in a week’s time, and we will discuss the terms.

I will be home to Smith whenever he comes,” he further said to Higgins. With a bow to Darcy and Elizabeth, Smith then followed the waiting footman.

“Welcome to Darcy House, miss,” Higgins said, ushering all of them inside. Just as the incoming party entered the hallway, a golden-haired young lady came rushing down the stairs and hugged Darcy.

“Oh, Fitzwilliam, you are home! I cannot tell you how worried we were when you did not turn up the day Banes came back with all your luggage. I was all ready to go to Uncle Harry for help when Mrs Annesley advised me to wait for a day and...” The girl came to an abrupt halt as she saw the motley group standing behind Darcy. “Oh, I am sorry...” she began but Darcy interrupted her with a smile, “There is no need to apologise, sweetling. Come, let me introduce you. This is Miss Bennet, and Miss Bennet - this is my sister Georgiana.”

As the young ladies curtsied to each other, Georgiana asked tentatively, “Miss Elizabeth Bennet?”

Elizabeth nodded. “Er... how did you know that Miss Darcy?” she asked in puzzlement.

“Oh, Fitzwilliam wrote about you in his letters when he stayed in Hertfordshire last year,” Georgiana said with a smile.

“Oh!” Elizabeth said as she glanced at Darcy and saw his heightened colour. Had she come to know of this information a week ago, she would have automatically jumped to the conclusion that he had written something to disparage her. However, now she knew differently and was really curious to know what he had written. She might have asked Miss Darcy for the details, but this new constraint that had sprung up between Mr Darcy and herself stilled her tongue. Before she could say something else to fill up the awkward silence, Millie created a welcome diversion.

“Dawcy?” She called out to Darcy, having had enough of being

ignored by the elders.

Oh, I am so sorry, poppet. How could I have forgotten you?" Darcy smiled as he picked her up.

"Georgie, I want you to meet Millie, and poppet, this is my sister Georgie."

For a moment, Georgiana stared at the child in her brother's arm in a puzzled manner but soon recovered herself. "How are you Millie?" she asked with a smile. When Millie continued to gaze at her in silence, she turned a little helplessly to her brother.

Darcy gave her a reassuring smile, "Would you like to see a small kitten, sweetheart?" he asked the child in his arm. At her eager nod, he turned to Higgins. "Higgins, please will you take Millie and Sarah to Mrs Higgins? I am sure she will introduce our Millie to Ginger."

Once the hallway was empty of everyone but the Darcy siblings and Elizabeth, Georgiana addressed their guest, "Let us go to the parlour and have some tea, Miss Bennet? Or... or would you like to refresh yourself first?"

"A cup of tea would be very welcome," Elizabeth replied, suddenly not wanting to be left alone in the strange house. As Elizabeth moved inside the room to which Miss Darcy ushered her, she was very impressed by its beauty. The understated elegance of the décor was so much in contrast with the pretentious opulence of the drawing-room at Rosings that she almost exclaimed about it aloud. But as she opened her mouth, her gaze fell on Darcy. She looked at his reserved countenance and once again felt inhibition grip her and elected to remain quiet. All of a sudden, she remembered his teasing look from the inn and their camaraderie earlier in the carriage and felt miserable. *'Why did I have to lose control like that and spoil everything,'* she thought gloomily.

"Miss Bennet, I hope you do not mind my asking, but... were you in some kind of an accident?" Georgiana asked nervously, gazing at the bandage on Elizabeth's head.

Elizabeth looked up at the sudden question. "Yes, Miss Darcy, the

carriage I was travelling in met with an accident, and I fell out from it when the door unexpectedly flung open,” she replied quietly.

“Oh, Lord, how terrible! I am so sorry for you, Miss Bennet,” Georgiana exclaimed in horror.

“I am sorry to have to distress you further, Georgie, but Millie’s grandmother – Mrs Dawson, with whom Miss Bennet was travelling from Hunsford to London, perished in the same accident.” Darcy continued the tale, taking his cue from Elizabeth and telling the facts while keeping the details to the minimum.

“Oh, no, that poor child!” Georgiana cried, distressed.

“Yes, poor little Millie,” Darcy sighed deeply. “I came upon them just after the accident occurred. After getting aid for Miss Bennet and making arrangements with the authorities for Mrs Dawson, I decided to accompany Miss Bennet and Millie here.”

“What a terrible tragedy!” a shocked Georgiana whispered as she looked compassionately at Elizabeth. “All I can say is that it was propitious that you came upon Miss Bennet and her companions and could assist them.” The shocking nature of the disclosure and Georgiana’s considerate nature came to Elizabeth and Darcy’s aid in that she was not keen to ask more details and risk causing any further upset to their guest.

“Yes... well, Miss Bennet’s uncle lives here in London. After tea, I will go, apprise him of the particulars and then accompany him here. This way, he will be able to decide how to break the news to his wife and Miss Bennet’s sister without causing too much distress,” Darcy said as he completed the tale.

“Of course, I can very well understand why you would want to be careful.” Georgiana nodded her understanding.

Before any further discussion could take place, Mrs Higgins brought in the tea, and Miss Darcy was the considerate hostess. As Elizabeth saw Miss Darcy trying hard to overcome her shyness and make things comfortable for her - to talk of things that would take her mind of the tragedy, it struck her all over again that Mr Wickham was a



pathological liar. He had even lied about something as innocuous as this young girl's temperament. '*And I believed that vile man with my eyes closed,*' she thought, and her increasing distress became visible on her countenance.

"Miss Bennet, are you not feeling well?" She looked up from her anxious musings to see that concern had once more replaced the reserved hauteur on Mr Darcy's face. For one moment, she felt too overwhelmed to reply and only shook her head in response. However, as the siblings continued to stare at her with identically furrowed brows, she swallowed hard and forced herself to speak. "I am quite well, Mr Darcy, only feeling somewhat tired."

"Then, please take some rest," he replied, then turned to his sister. "Georgie, would you ask Mrs Higgins to prepare the Green Room for Miss Bennet. It is overlooking the garden, and she might find it more soothing."

If she found it significant that her brother had asked for a room in the family wing to be prepared for Miss Bennet, despite there being quite a few well-appointed rooms in the guest wing, Georgiana did not let it be visible on her countenance. She nodded. "Of course, in one of your letters, you did mention that Miss Bennet is quite fond of nature," she said guilelessly. Then observed the slightly flustered expressions on the faces of both her audience with interest.

Without deigning to comment on that particular remark, Darcy got up to leave. "Just as soon as I have had a change of raiment, I will visit your uncle's warehouse. I take it that at this time of the day, that is where I would be able to meet him?" At Elizabeth's nod, he bowed and took his leave of the ladies.

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When Elizabeth came down to the parlour after rest and wearing a fresh set of clothes, she found another lady sitting there along with Miss Darcy. '*This must be Mrs Annesley,*' Elizabeth thought and was proved right almost immediately when Miss Darcy performed the

introductions. Elizabeth enquired after Millie and was amused to be told that the child and her dearest friend Ginger had both retired for the night after a tiring bout of running around in the garden. The ladies sat having a desultory conversation until Higgins came to announce the dinner. When they started to move towards the dining room, Elizabeth, who had been watching the door for Darcy's return - for more reasons than one - could not contain herself any longer.

"Mr Darcy has not come back as yet? I... I was waiting to know if he has been able to meet my uncle," she found herself explaining unnecessarily.

Georgiana, to whom the question had been addressed, replied regretfully, "I can understand your impatience, Miss Bennet. Unfortunately, Fitzwilliam is not back as yet. He had asked not to wait for dinner for him - that he would have a tray sent up to his room if he were late." The quickly veiled disappointment in Miss Bennet's eyes made Georgiana draw her own conclusions. She had been very surprised and curious when her brother had written several times about Miss Bennet in his letters to her. But when he had come back from Hertfordshire last year and never mentioned the lady ever again, she had assumed that her conjectures were wrong. However, now that she had seen them together, she was starting to believe that her earlier surmise might have been correct. Her brother and Miss Bennet did seem to like each other. Unfortunately, she had also noticed the strange constraint between the two. *'What can I do to help these two along? If only Richard were here! He would know exactly what to do, but in his absence, I will have to make do.'* Georgiana decided. That she had found Miss Bennet very likeable herself hardened her resolve.

Since the two young ladies were quite distracted with their own thoughts, it was left to poor Mrs Annesley to carry the bulk of the conversation at the dinner table. To her relief, things improved significantly when they moved back to the parlour after the dinner. Once the tea was over, Georgiana invited Miss Bennet to her music room. Elizabeth nodded eagerly in response. "Ever since I heard Miss Bingley talk about your exceptional talent on the pianoforte, I have

been very keen to hear you play, Miss Darcy.”

“Miss Bingley is too kind, I am sure,” Georgiana replied, dismissing the other lady with casual politeness. “Please, won’t you call me Georgiana, Miss Bennet?”

Elizabeth smiled. “Only if you call me Elizabeth.”

“Well then, Elizabeth, let us go to the music room.” Georgiana offered her arm and grinned.

After a solo performance, which was applauded enthusiastically by her audience, Georgiana insisted that Elizabeth accompany her next for a duet. “No, no Elizabeth, there is no need for this false modesty. I have it on good authority that you play very well,” Georgiana pressed when Elizabeth demurred.

“I am sorry to say that you have been quite misled by your source who has grossly exaggerated my skill,” Elizabeth protested laughingly.

“I have never known Fitzwilliam to exaggerate, Elizabeth. So, if he writes to me that nothing has given him more pleasure than to hear you perform, then I have to believe him,” Georgiana countered, and smiled to herself when she saw Elizabeth blush deeply.

“So, now I know what he had written about me all that while ago,” Elizabeth thought, feeling surprised and pleased at the same time. Her pleasure, however, disappeared soon enough as she again recollected how she had misjudged and hurt him, not once but many times since that day in the parsonage.

“Elizabeth? Is something wrong?” Georgiana asked worriedly.

“No... nothing is wrong, Georgiana. How about you play, and I sing along?” Elizabeth asked, determined not to let her mood spoil Georgiana’s evening. When the other girl endorsed the suggestion wholeheartedly, Elizabeth proposed the same song that she had sung at Lucas lodge last year. The song that *he* had liked. Luckily, Georgiana was familiar with it, and without much ado, she struck the first note.

So it was that, when Darcy entered the music room, he heard *the* song

in *the* voice he had longed to hear for such a long time. As he stood spellbound, he absentmindedly observed the rapport that had so swiftly developed between Georgiana and Elizabeth. Once Elizabeth missed a note, and Georgie flawlessly covered it up with her playing. The pleased smiles the ladies exchanged and the evident happiness in both their faces gladdened his heart. The warmth of his pleasure started to melt the doubts that had sprung up in his mind since Elizabeth had accused him so unjustly this afternoon. He could not pretend - her sudden attack had been like a punch to his gut. It had been agonising to acknowledge that she could so easily misjudge him - again. Especially when he had been trying ever so hard to demonstrate that he had changed. *'Maybe her dislike of me is too deep-seated? Then what right do I have to force my attentions on her and be the cause of her unhappiness?'* He had asked himself in distress. It had made him doubt his own heart and his resolution to court her. It had also made him doubt his judgement that she had begun to thaw, even... begun to like him just a little. But now, as he stood observing the happy smiles on the faces of two of his most favourite girls, he knew once again that he was helpless. He could not abandon hope. He would just have to try a little harder - to undo some of his mistakes and... maybe, clarify some of hers?

The song came to an end all too soon. As Mrs Annesley clapped enthusiastically, he watched a laughing Georgie turn to Elizabeth and exclaim, "I have to say, Elizabeth, my brother was right - as he usually is!"

'Oh, Lord, what has Georgie been telling Elizabeth?' Darcy thought in consternation. He must have made some sudden movement because Elizabeth turned her head sharply to look at him. Although she veiled her expression soon enough, he did not miss that first unguarded look of welcome in her eyes. *'Yes, I will have to try harder,'* he repeated the thought almost like a prayer. *'... and wait a little longer.'* He sighed as he remembered the information he had to impart to Elizabeth.

"Mr Darcy, were you able to meet Uncle Gardiner?" Elizabeth asked as she looked behind him, obviously searching for her uncle.

“No, Miss Bennet, unfortunately, I could not. Your uncle, his family and Miss Bennet all are currently not in town. I met someone called Paxton at the warehouse.”

“Joseph Paxton, my uncle’s right-hand man,” Elizabeth murmured in response as she drew near Darcy.

“Yes, the very one. He informed me that Mr Gardiner and his family have all gone away to visit a family friend. He was not very keen to tell me their whereabouts, so I did not press him. However, he did tell me that they are expected back home in approximately four days.” Darcy looked around, and finding that Georgiana and Mrs Annesley were not within the hearing distance, he lowered his voice and asked, “I think you were not expected back in Gracechurch Street for another se’nnight, were you?” At her nod, he continued, “Hmm.. that would explain why they all went away with a clear conscience. I did go to Gracechurch Street, just for confirmation. There I found only a footman who more or less corroborated what Paxton had told me.”

Many thoughts came clamouring into Elizabeth’s mind as Darcy finished speaking but, the loudest, most prominent one was that they were not to be parted just yet! She had four more days - to show that she was not an ungrateful wretch and apologise for her unfair accusations. She opened her mouth to do just that and saw that Georgiana and Mrs Annesley were coming towards them. So instead of apologising, she decided to do something else that was long overdue.

“Mr Darcy, Alex?” She said very softly.

“Yes, Elizabeth?” He murmured equally softly.

“I really do not know why I have not said so before, but I would like to tell you now that I will forever be grateful that it was *you* who came to my...umm.. our rescue that day. Thank you so very much,” she said, suddenly feeling much lighter for having told him even a tiny bit of her feelings.

“You do not have to thank me, Elizabeth. I am equally grateful that it was *I* who came upon you... all that day. You would think me foolish, but I honestly believe that it was meant to be.”

For few precious moments, they just stood there gazing into each other's eyes. Each smiling a little foolishly, totally oblivious that they were being watched by two pairs of very interested eyes.

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## Chapter 14

The next morning Elizabeth was going down for breakfast when she met Georgiana on the stairs. “Good morning, Elizabeth. I hope you slept well,” the younger girl greeted her warmly.

“Oh, yes. I fell asleep the moment my head touched the pillow last night,” Elizabeth replied with a smile. “I can see that like me, you also prefer to wake up early in the mornings,” she added.

“Umm... not really,” Georgiana replied sheepishly. “It is just that Fitzwilliam has been away for several weeks, so I got up early today in order to break my fast with him.”

“Oh... well, *I* do prefer to get up early, mostly in anticipation of an invigorating walk through the delightful woods around my home.”

“Hmm... while I cannot conjure your lovely woods here in London, I can certainly accompany you for a walk around our more humble gardens. If you would like that?”

“That is not an offer I can refuse!”

When the girls entered the dining room, they found it empty. “It seems Fitzwilliam is yet to come back from his ride. Would you like to visit the gardens before you break your fast?”

At Elizabeth’s nod, Georgiana led the way to the French windows opening out in the garden. When they stepped out, they heard Millie’s voice. “Go, fetch, Ginga!” The ladies exchanged an amused look and turned their steps towards the voice. As they turned around the corner, they found the garden quite surprisingly full of people and a kitten, of course. There were Millie, Ginger, Sarah, a footman, and Mr Darcy.

Millie had just thrown a ball and was insisting that her latest friend go and pick it up for her. Even had he possessed the retriever like

capabilities that Millie was expecting from him, the ball was too big for poor Ginger to fetch.

Darcy chuckled as he addressed the little girl, "If you want that ball fetched, poppet, in Ginger's stead you will need a *very* big dog."

"No dog. Millie only want Ginga."

"Then who will pick up the ball?"

"Millie," the child replied, then went to suit her actions to the words.

When she came back, Darcy smiled approvingly. "That's my girl!" He flicked the child's braid teasingly and added, "I do believe you deserve a treat for being such a good friend to Ginger. Sarah, will you please take Millie with you and see what treats the cook has prepared for her?"

Georgiana smilingly observed the little girl skipping along with the maid and said, "I know the reason for your visit to our home was not the most propitious, but it is so good to have you and Millie here with us, Elizabeth. I am glad that you will be staying with us for a few days more." Suddenly her brow furrowed. "I just realized how fortunate it was that Fitzwilliam came upon you after the accident. Otherwise, you would have been in real trouble when you reached your uncle's home yesterday," she said thoughtfully. "By the by, did you not inform your uncle of your arrival?"

Elizabeth, who had been musing over how Mr Darcy would make a great father... and indulging in related daydreams, had not really been paying attention to Georgiana's speech. Consequently, the awkward question coming at her so abruptly flummoxed her. "I... er.." she floundered, not knowing what to say in response. Fortunately, Darcy came to her rescue.

"I had asked Miss Bennet the very same thing yesterday. It seems she had been missing her sister for some time. So, when the opportunity came knocking in the form of Mrs Dawson's impending journey to London, Miss Bennet decided to accompany her and surprise her sister."

"Oh, so that's why..." Georgiana nodded her understanding. If she was



surprised by Elizabeth's strangely impetuous behaviour, she did not let on.

With her brows rising in surprise, Elizabeth listened to Mr Darcy glibly making up a story to cover up for her awkwardness. Darcy glanced at her, and correctly interpreting the unspoken question in her eyes, replied obliquely, "I have never been enamoured of fencing as a sport, but whenever I am challenged, I do try to hold my own."

Elizabeth understood, and her heart picked up tempo at this indication of their returning rapport, but poor Georgiana was left totally bewildered at this arbitrary speech.

"Why on earth are you suddenly talking about fencing, Fitzwilliam?"

"Uh... I ... I just thought to let you know my philosophy in life," Darcy replied with as much dignity as he could muster.

"Ph... philosophy in life?" Georgiana blinked at her brother in astonishment, then glanced from his flushed countenance to Elizabeth's openly grinning one. The realization quickly dawned that the later part of the conversation had definitely not been meant for *her*. She wisely chose not to press the issue.

"Of course," she murmured, then taking pity on her brother, suggested brightly, "Shall we go in? I am feeling ravenous."

"By all means, Georgie," came the very relieved response.

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The same afternoon Elizabeth found herself seated alone in the library of Darcy House. Last year when she had stayed at Netherfield, it had amused her highly to hear Miss Bingley wax poetic about all things Darcy. Well, to give that supercilious lady her due, she had been absolutely accurate about Georgiana's skill on the pianoforte. And now that Elizabeth had a walk around the library at Darcy House, she could very well believe that Miss Bingley had not exaggerated about the Pemberley library either. Had it been any normal day, she would have flitted from bookshelf to bookshelf, having a hard time choosing a book from the eclectic collection in front of her. Regrettably, today

her mind refused to stay on books, as she kept wondering what Mr Darcy would find when he met Mrs Dawson's friend, Mrs Basset.

Immediately after luncheon, he had gone to meet the lady at the address they had found in Mrs Dawson's trunk. Since then, Elizabeth had been constantly on tenterhooks. Georgiana had tried her best to keep her from fretting by engaging her in a light-hearted conversation about the latest fashion trends in the metropolis. When her music teacher arrived half an hour ago, she had reluctantly left after showing Elizabeth to the library.

Once her initial wonder at the exceptionally well-stocked library had passed, Elizabeth was back to her brooding. *'Why has he not come back? It is nearly three hours since he went away! Mayhap he was not able to meet Mrs Basset. But then what would he be doing for three hours? Perhaps the lady did not want to share information with a stranger, and he had to spend his time persuading her. Or... maybe... right at this moment, Mr Darcy is aware who is Millie's father! Oh, how I wish that rake is somehow brought to see sense... to accept the responsibility for Millie. But... could such a man ever love the sweet child the way she deserves?'* Feeling agitated, she got up and went to a section of the library she had not previously explored. When she reached the far end, she noticed a door leading into another chamber. The door was ajar, and as her gaze strayed to the other side, she could make out the corner of a large table, atop which were arranged a neat stack of ledgers. *'Ah, this must be his study.'* The realization came with an earnest desire to explore the room where he must spend a large portion of his time.

"Georgiana asked you to enjoy the library, Lizzy, not make free with Mr Darcy's private study! Really, you are now beyond the pale – reading letters not given to you, wishing to break into private rooms. The Lord alone knows what you would be coming up with next!"

"Shut it!" Although she snarled at Miss Pesky, her words did prevent Elizabeth from going inside the study. As it turned out, it was a very fortunate decision. She had not even taken a few steps away from the door of the study when she heard someone entering it from the other side. From the footsteps, it appeared that there were more than one

person!

She thanked her stars for saving her the embarrassment of being discovered in a place that she had no business to be in. She had just taken the first step to move towards the far side of the room when she heard a familiar voice and froze in her place.

“It is fortunate that you turned up when you did, Darcy. I have to confess that for a moment, I was afraid that Higgins was going to shut the door on my face!”

‘*Mr Bingley!*’

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Darcy was stepping out from the carriage in front of his home when he noticed a man at the front door. ‘*Ah, so Bingley came as soon as he got my message!*’ he thought as his gaze swept over his butler in the doorway. He was surprised to observe the stately expression on Higgins’ face that he usually reserved for unwanted callers! ‘*What in heaven’s name is Higgins about? Drat! I forgot to inform him about Bingley’s visit!*’ He thought in consternation and rushed forward.

“It is fortunate that you turned up when you did, Darcy. I have to confess that for a moment, I was afraid that Higgins was going to shut the door on my face!” Bingley said as he followed Darcy inside his study.

“I am sorry, Bingley, it is totally my fault. When I came back yesterday, I told Higgins that I am not at home to visitors for a few days. Unfortunately, I forgot to mention that those do not include friends like you and Richard. I am sorry,” Darcy apologised as he motioned for Bingley to take a seat.

The easy-going Bingley quickly waved away the apology. “You have been away much longer than you intended, Darce. I came back from Scarborough last week and was surprised to discover that you had not yet returned. Ah... I have never known you to stay at *Rosings* for such an extended visit,” he said wryly.

“I have discovered that sometimes the allure of a place might change

with the people residing in the vicinity,” Darcy muttered in response.

“Eh? What was that?”

“Nothing of import, Bingley. Would you care for a drink?” Darcy asked. At Bingley’s nod, he poured two glasses of wine. He offered one to Bingley, then took a large swallow from his own and sighed deeply. The visit to Mrs Basset had been quite disappointing. Now, with this coming interview with Bingley that just might result in the termination of a friendship of longstanding, he had felt in dire need of something to revive his flagging spirits.

“So, how was your visit to Scarborough?” he asked, more in an attempt to delay the inevitable.

“It was well enough, but you know Caroline. Once she gets it into her head that a visit has lasted long enough, nothing would do for her but to get a move on - and take everyone else along.”

Darcy murmured noncommittally, but his heart twisted with guilt as he remembered how he had aided Miss Bingley when she had decided that their stay at Netherfield had lasted long enough. He had then believed that he had done his friend a good turn, but now he knew differently. As he sat listening to him talk about a cousin of his in Scarborough, Darcy tried to observe Bingley carefully. It was quite easy for him to discern that while Bingley tried *to appear* his old jovial self, his eyes sparkled less, and his smile often did not reach his eyes.

Darcy sighed again. It was no good delaying. Bingley had the right to know that Miss Bennet had visited his home. It may not do any good after all this time, but still, he had a right to know and... make his own decisions.

“Bingley?” He suddenly called out and interrupted his friend in mid-flow. Bingley blinked in surprise at this uncharacteristic rudeness from Darcy but asked politely, “Yes, Darce?”

“I... I have to tell you something long overdue. It is about Miss Bennet.”

Bingley’s face immediately lost colour, and he asked, “M... Miss Bennet? Jane Bennet? What about her? Is she...” he broke off

fearfully.

Darcy cursed himself for making such a hash of things. “No... no, Bingley, Miss Bennet is well,” he replied swiftly.

“Then... has she married someone else?”

Darcy groaned aloud. “Bingley, please! Let me tell my piece without further interruptions. Ask me what you will at the end. If you still feel like talking to me once I have told you everything- and no... Miss Bennet is not married.”

Bingley’s eyes widened in surprise at Darcy’s strange words, but he chose to keep quiet after noting his friend’s tense face.

“I have recently come to know - from a reliable source – that... that my understanding of Miss Bennet’s feelings towards you was faulty. Contrary to my perception, she was not indifferent to you.”

“She... she cared for me?” Bingley asked slowly. For Darcy, the sudden hope that flared in Bingley’s eyes and the swiftness with which it doused was painful to watch. “But surely is too late now...it is more than five months since I left...” Bingley mumbled to himself.

Darcy answered the question that had been directed at him. “That was what I was given to understand. I am truly sorry Bingley...”

“Why do *you* apologise, Darcy. You advised me in good faith. It was I who chose to believe you and Caroline over the voice of my own heart,” Bingley said dully.

“Oh, Lord! How I wish it was the only time I had wronged you, Bingley,” Darcy burst out in agitation.

“What are saying, Darcy?” Bingley asked in surprise. “For heaven’s sake, speak up!” he almost shouted when Darcy did not answer immediately.

“Miss Bennet has been in London since last December. She had also paid a visit to your sisters very soon after she arrived here from Meryton.”

“What?” Bingley exclaimed in shock. “Caroline and Louisa did not even bother to tell me, and I am sure they were ill-bred enough not to

pay her a return visit,” he added bitterly.

“Uh... your sisters did return the visit and... and through their conduct let it be known that they were not keen to further the acquaintance,” Darcy clarified, feeling uncomfortable.

“Oh, God! What must she think of me!” Bingley groaned in distress. Suddenly, he gave Darcy a hard look. “You knew of this, how? And why did you not tell *me* if you knew?”

Darcy swallowed hard, now that the time had come to reveal his own betrayal. “Miss Bingley had apprised me of Miss Bennet’s presence here in London and her visit to your home. She was afraid that you were still not completely over your... infatuation and were in danger of succumbing to Miss Bennet’s... charms all over again. Unfortunately, that was my own understanding of the situation, and I was still under the misapprehension that Miss Bennet was indifferent to you. So, I... we all agreed to keep her visit a secret from you...” Darcy finished a little lamely.

“Of course, you did! And why would you not? I had proved to you many times before that I was no better than a helpless child - quite amenable to be led by his leading-strings!” Bingley retorted with bitter sarcasm.

Darcy sighed. He could very well understand Bingley’s anger and empathize with it. “I truly am very sorry, Bingley. I could try to justify my abhorrent conduct by claiming that I believed I was acting for your own good. And while that *is* what I believed at the time - it does not justify my arrogant presumption that I knew better than you about your life, nor my detestable interference in something so personal,” he said with complete sincerity. In the awkward silence that followed, Darcy found himself confessing, “Had the tables been turned, and it was you who had interfered similarly... I... I have to admit I would not have easily tolerated it. So – if you now decide that you would no longer be able to continue with our friendship, I will understand. It would sadden me... but I will understand.”

Bingley heard Darcy in silence, and for a long while, sat pondering over the shocking disclosures. The silence stretched for so long that an

anxious Darcy started to worry that his friend had decided to have nothing more to do with him. Finally, Bingley broke his silence. "You have been quite candid with me, Darcy. So, I too can confess that a part of the blame – a big part, lies with me. For years I have been quite happy for you to make decisions on my behalf, even when they consisted of... *interference in personal matters*. So, to put the entire blame on you now would hardly be fair," Bingley said with a wry quirk to his lips and fell silent once again. Suddenly, he burst out, "But Darce, I have to say this - before now, I always *knew* that you were acting on my behalf. Or was even that my misapprehension?" he asked painfully.

Darcy closed his eyes in mortification, "No, Bingley, it was not, I swear, and there will not be a repeat if you give our friendship another chance." Bingley looked at him searchingly, then gave a swift nod of acceptance, and Darcy took a relieved breath. It appeared as if their friendship might survive this mess, after all.

"Umm.. when did you come to know that... that you were wrong in your perception of Miss Bennet," Bingley asked after a while.

Darcy sighed, not liking the direction the conversation was taking, but he had promised to answer Bingley's queries. "A few days ago," he replied.

"A few days ago! But... you were in Rosings at the time. Who in Rosings would know about Miss Bennet..." Bingley's voice tapered off as he looked questioningly at Darcy.

"Miss Elizabeth Bennet."

"Miss Elizabeth! What was she doing there?"

"She was visiting her friend Charlotte Collins, formerly Miss Charlotte Lucas. Miss Lucas had married Miss Elizabeth's cousin, Mr Collins, in January this year. I do not know if you remember, but Mr Collins is my Aunt Catherine's parson."

"Ah, yes, of course." Bingley sat back and digested this new piece of information.

Thankfully for Darcy, Bingley's thoughts flew in a direction quite

different from the one he was fearing. "If... if Miss Elizabeth told you about Miss Bennet's feelings, then I... we can safely believe them to be true... can't we? But... that was months ago... and now she must believe that I am a feckless cad..." he muttered despairingly. Although Bingley was speaking to him, Darcy understood that he has 'talking' to himself and wisely kept quiet.

"Is Miss Bennet still residing in London?" Bingley asked suddenly.

"Yes, she is, but she and her uncle's family are away at the moment. They all will be back in a few days."

"Oh, do... do you think I should go and see her once she comes back?" Bingley asked diffidently.

"Oh my God, Bingley!" Darcy groaned in frustration, and as Bingley blinked at him in surprise, he asked, "What do *you* believe you should do, Bingley?"

Bingley smiled ruefully as he finally understood the reason for his friend's exasperated look.

"Well, I believe that I should visit her the moment she is back in London. If nothing else, I owe her an abject apology that is more than five months overdue!" he replied firmly. A relieved Darcy opened his mouth to agree with this sensible plan but was forestalled as Bingley continued, "Then... then I will throw myself at her mercy and beg another chance. If... if she finds that she cannot forgive my feckless behaviour, it would be nothing more than I deserve for being so lily-livered. However, if by some miracle, she is willing to offer me a ray of hope, then I would try my best to prove myself worthy of her generosity," he averred fervently.

Darcy smiled his appreciation. "That is the spirit, Bingley. Here, this is her uncle's address. Whenever they are back, you can go and clear the air," he said, offering Bingley a slip of paper."

"And Bingley?"

"Yes?"

"While telling her the truth, you might need to apportion the blame where it is due. You have my full permission to tell her of my perfidy



that has caused so much pain to you both and kept you apart.”

Bingley gave him a rueful smile. “Well, I never saw you tie me to a bedpost when you offered me your advice last December. Must have been invisible chains then,” he said wryly.

“Bingley...”

“But do not worry, now that I have your permission, I would know who to blame for any or all complaints Miss Bennet might have against me.” Bingley smiled. “I would take your leave now, ” he said as he got up to go.

“Once I have met her, I... I shall come and tell you how things went, shall I?”

Darcy smiled. “Of course, Bingley, you know you are always welcome here, despite how Higgins behaved today.”

At the door, Bingley turned towards Darcy once more. “You know, Darcy, I *have* come to realize that I need to have a greater sense of self-belief - the courage of my convictions - and I promise to work towards that end. However, I also know that once in a while I will falter. When that happens, I do hope that my friend and mentor will still be there to nudge me in the right direction, the way he has done all these years,” he said simply.

For a moment, Darcy felt swamped with emotions. Bingley’s easy absolution to him humbled him. He was again filled with guilt at Bingley’s continued trust in him despite the deception he had perpetrated on him. He desperately wished that Miss Bennet would forgive his friend, and together the two would have the happiness they deserved. However, being unaccustomed to wear his heart on his sleeve, he could respond only with a gruff, “But of course, Bingley.”

Once Bingley had ridden away, Darcy turned from the main door, and the first person he saw was Elizabeth framed in the library door.

## Chapter 15

Darcy tried to read Elizabeth's face but found it difficult to discern anything from her carefully neutral expression. *'Did she see Bingley leave? I suppose it does not really matter. It is time I tell her the truth. She might even be able to help Bingley's cause, and I... I can but hope that she will understand that I have seen the error of my ways,'* he thought as he went forward to meet her.

"That was Bingley. In other circumstances, I would have invited you to meet him, but.."

Elizabeth interrupted him with a wry smile, "I think you could be forgiven if you think I am lost to all sense and propriety, Mr Darcy." Darcy blinked in surprise at this curious speech, but before he could respond, Elizabeth continued, "In the past se'nnight I have given you enough reasons to do so. Fortunately, however, I have enough sense remaining to realize why I should not have met Mr Bingley here in Darcy House today."

"Of course, I do not think any such thing, Miss Bennet," Darcy replied, resolutely ignoring the latter part of her speech.

"You truly did not think so after my appalling behaviour yesterday?" Elizabeth asked quietly and felt saddened by the shadow of pain that flitted across his face at the reminder.

"No... I thought that perhaps my behaviour in the past has made you dislike me so much that you have come to be instinctively suspicious of my intentions," he replied gruffly.

"No!" Elizabeth protested sharply, then, feeling conscious, glanced uneasily at the footman nearby. "I do not dislike you, Mr Darcy," she said more softly and just in time stopped herself from adding *'quite to the contrary, in fact!'* "How could I dislike the kindest man I know? I am very sorry for my abominable accusations at the inn. I can assure you I did not mean any of it," she said after a moment.

Relief flooded Darcy at the apparent sincerity in her eyes. "But... then why were you so angry yesterday?" he asked in puzzlement.

Not in a position to confess the real reason - her insecurities, she could only shake her head.

Darcy looked at her flushed countenance and did not press her for a response. "I... wish someday you will be able to tell me," was all he said. Then he called out to the footman, "Stephen, please would you ask Mrs Higgins to serve some tea in the library?"

"Come, Miss Bennet, we will wait for the tea inside the library. Meanwhile, I would like to tell you something," he said as he gestured for Elizabeth to go inside. He followed her after ensuring that the door of the library remained wide open.

He waited for Elizabeth to sit, but suddenly feeling all the weight of the forthcoming disclosures, remained standing himself. *'Just now, Elizabeth told me that she no longer dislikes me; would that change once again as she realizes how duplicitously I acted to keep her sister and Bingley apart?'* he mused anxiously. Then he hardened his resolve and turned to address her.

"I had sent for Bingley this morning as I wanted to apprise him of my error of judgement regarding Miss Bennet," he said and tried to gauge the effect of his words on her countenance. When she remained silent, he continued, "I have now told him of her presence here since December, and he showed his eagerness to visit her as soon as she is back in London. I do not know how much it will aid Bingley, but at least now Miss Bennet would know the truth that... that Bingley was unaware of her stay here and of... her visit to his home. I truly hope that it is not too late for them. I... Elizabeth... I.."

Elizabeth realized that he was working up to apologise about the matter, this time to her. Suddenly it hurt her that he should be humbling himself all over again. For her, it was more than enough that after realizing his mistake, he had tried to correct it at the earliest possible opportunity. She, who had misjudged Mr Darcy so badly and abused him to his face believing the words of a scoundrel, was hardly in a position to sit in judgement of someone else's mistakes. So, she

interrupted him with a quiet, “Mr Darcy, I ... know. I was in the library when Mr Bingley visited you. I... I was in a position to hear most of your conversation and did so...because once you mentioned Jane, I could not make myself move away as I had planned. I am sorry.”

“Oh,” he said as he tried to understand the implications of that. In a way, it was a relief. The interview with Bingley had been difficult enough, but with Elizabeth, it would have been nerve-wracking as he desperately wished for her understanding and absolution. Now, as he tried to read her reaction to the disclosures, to his relief he could not discern any overt hostility. “*And she assured me she does not dislike me after she had heard my conversation with Bingley. So, she must believe that I sincerely repent my interference in the affair.*” As the realization dawned, he felt relieved enough to take a seat opposite hers.

“Frankly, I am glad that you overheard our conversation, Elizabeth. I was not at all looking forward to speaking about my abominable conduct one more time. Although I have wanted you to know the truth ever... ever since that evening at the parsonage,” he added in a constricted voice. “In fact, I was so eager to offer you my defence that I had penned it down in a letter the very same night. The next day I had waited for you in the main park at Rosings, but you never came. I was very disappointed then, but now I believe whatever has happened is for the best. At the time, I was yet to realize the extent of the hurt I had caused, and the letter had been written in such bitterness of spirit – towards you and all of whom you hold dear... I am so sorry, Elizabeth.” He sighed and shook his head regretfully.

For her part, Elizabeth had wanted to apologise to him ever since she had read his letter. Contrary to her angry accusations on the day of his proposal, she had now understood he was not the person primarily responsible for Jane’s heartache. She wanted to let him know that and apologise. More importantly, she needed to apologise for siding with a rake and so unjustly accusing a decent and honourable man. However, she could not have apologised to him without confessing how she had come about her knowledge. Now, as she sat observing his dear face, so full of remorse, she came to a sudden decision.

“What did you write of us that we did not deserve?” she asked quietly. Darcy’s eyes widened in shock, “W...what? How?” he asked in confusion.

Elizabeth threw him an embarrassed glance. “I am sorry, Mr Darcy, but you have under your roof, a woman, who not only overhears conversations not meant for her but also reads letters that accidentally drop out from falling books - if they are addressed to her,” she replied ruefully.

“Oh!” Darcy said as he understood her cryptic statement. *‘Oh Lord, she has read that insulting letter! What must she be thinking of me?’* he thought uneasily. However, as he observed her embarrassed countenance, he found himself wanting to comfort her, and said excusingly, “Er... I suppose, under the circumstances, it is quite understandable that you read the letter.”

“Frankly, sir, it is not, but since that letter gave me an insight into how prejudiced, vain and absurd I had been, I have not as yet learned to regret my conduct,” she replied in a constrained voice. For a while, an awkward silence reigned in the library, then Elizabeth looked him in the eye and said, “That letter made me realize that I am not as capable a judge of human character I used to think I was. I have also learnt how easily my prejudices and vanity can conquer the good sense the Almighty kindly bestowed on me.” She paused to take a breath and finding it difficult to bear his intense gaze, looked away. Forcing herself to continue, she addressed a thick tome on the nearby table, “And finally, it made me perceive that just because I have decided to dislike someone, it does not necessarily mean that they deserve it, nor does it make them responsible for all the evils of this world.”

“Elizabeth...” he murmured, moved by the obvious distress in her face.

She looked up at him then and smiled sadly, “My dear sister’s pain had made me want to lash out at someone, and on that day, you were the most convenient target. But I now know that there was no *single* reason for Jane’s disappointment. My family’s less than desirable

conduct, her own reticence, and Mr Bingley's lack of conviction - all played their part in it to different degrees. On second thoughts, I cannot really blame you for offering a word of caution to Mr Bingley. It was always his prerogative to heed it.. or not," she said ruminatively. Suddenly she gave him an embarrassed look and then hurriedly glanced away. "The only thing I *could* blame you for was the... the subterfuge you employed to keep them apart in December last. However, since you have already apologised to Mr Bingley and tried to mitigate it..." He made a quick movement at that, and she looked up at him and smiled wryly. "In fact, you are the only one who has done anything on the matter. When... when it is *Mr Bingley* who is supposedly in love and a member of *my family* who is in distress," she added with a sigh. "The only thing *I* can do is beg your pardon for holding you responsible for everyone else's mistakes and doing so in the most vituperative way possible. I am sorry, Mr Darcy..."

"Elizabeth, you do not..." Darcy began urgently, but she interrupted him.

"And more than that, I *need* to apologise for my awful lack of judgement where that... that *hateful man* is concerned. I do beg your pardon most sincerely for being foolish and vain enough to be taken in by an outwardly charming appearance, for completely abandoning my reason and in the process causing you grievous hurt. I am... more sorry than I can say, Mr Darcy."

Darcy looked at her distraught countenance and felt an almost compelling desire to gather her to him and clasp her in a tight, comforting hug. Feeling scared that throwing all caution to the winds, he might do exactly that, he got up and moved to a safe distance from where she sat. Unable to do what he truly wanted, he tried to offer her comfort through his words. "Please do not be too distressed to be taken in by that scoundrel, Elizabeth. He is a practised deceiver and has duped many people more worldly-wise than you. From what I have understood, being suspicious is not in your nature..."

"But I thought being sensible was!" she burst out.

Darcy ignored the outburst diplomatically and continued, "As I

already told you, he has deceived and cheated many people before you - much older and more experienced in the ways of the world. Kindly do not distress yourself about that any longer, I beg you.” He smiled in relief when her countenance showed visible signs of lessening agitation.

“And Elizabeth, I am very sorry for my insults to your family – for what I said and what I wrote...” He raised his hand as she opened her mouth. “Where less than exemplary conduct of a family member is concerned, I am in no position to judge anyone else. For all their foibles, none of your family is deliberately cruel or heartless enough to attempt ruination or worse of a defenceless woman!” he said shaking his head in disbelief. “I still cannot get my head around what my aunt did...” For a while, he was silent, brooding on his aunt’s atrocious conduct. Then he deliberately pushed away the disturbing thoughts and turned to her. “It was you who made me realize that ultimately we all are responsible only for our conduct and should be judged just for that. If the situation is less than ideal where others are concerned, we can easily choose to ignore, tolerate... or accept for our own peace of mind, for friends and family and ... for those we love,” he said earnestly as he looked deep into her eyes, willing her to understand him.

What she would have said in response, he was not to know as at the moment Mrs Higgins came bustling in with the tea. That good lady was soon followed by Georgiana and Mrs Annesley.

“What did you find about Millie, Fitzwilliam?” Georgiana asked once they all had been served tea. Although she was not aware of the true circumstances of Millie’s birth, she did know that her brother was trying to locate any surviving relations of the little girl.

Darcy sighed dispiritedly. “Nothing much, I am afraid. This Mrs Basset and her husband run a boarding house in a not so salubrious part of London. At first, I had difficulty locating her place, then in getting her to open up about Mrs Dawson. It was only when I told her about our quest for little Millie that she turned more sympathetic. Regrettably, all she could tell me was that Mrs Dawson used to work in a girls’

seminary in Bath – no further details like its name or those of its proprietors.” He turned to Elizabeth then. “There are more than a few seminaries in Bath. If Mrs Collins is unable to shed any further light on the matter, then I suppose we may need to use the services of an investigator.”

Elizabeth nodded. “I will write to Charlotte at the earliest,” she replied quietly.

The failure to move forward in the investigations for Millie and their fear for her future cast a pall on their gathering, and it broke up soon after.

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The next day was a busy one for Mr Darcy. Not long after breakfast, his steward came with some pressing business matter, and both men were closeted in the study for a considerable period. Since Georgiana was also busy with her music practice at the time, Elizabeth found herself at a loose end and decided to spend hers in the library. This time to peruse its contents with her usual zeal for all kinds of books.

When the lunch hour found only the three ladies at the dining table, Elizabeth could not resist asking after Mr Darcy. Georgiana informed her that he had gone to meet their uncle, the Earl of Matlock. It was quite late by the time he came back in the evening. He joined them just as Higgins announced the dinner.

“I am sorry for being so tardy, Georgie. All I can say in my defence is that I got unavoidably detained.

Georgiana smiled up at her brother, “It is of no import, Fitzwilliam. What matters is that you are in time to partake in your dinner with all of us.”

“Well then, what are we waiting for? Let us proceed,” Darcy replied jovially.

As Elizabeth was seating herself at the dining table, she happened to glance at him and observed the air of suppressed excitement about him. At that very moment, he looked her way, and as their eyes met,

she raised her brow enquiringly. He smiled and mouthed, "Later."

"Brother, how did you find Aunt Susan today?"

"I am afraid I did not see her at all, Georgie. I went to Matlock House seeking some help from Uncle Harry and met only with him."

"Oh! I do hope that you were successful in whatever you sought his help for."

"Oh, yes, my dear, much more than I had dared to hope when I went out today," Darcy nodded eagerly but did not elaborate further.

The talk soon turned to general topics and continued similarly until the meal got over. After dinner, Darcy decided to forgo his port, and all of them moved to the drawing-room together. Soon after, Mrs Annesley asked to be excused on the pretext of writing some letters. Immediately sensing an opportunity to assist her brother and Elizabeth in getting to know each other better, Georgiana moved towards the pianoforte after expressing her desire to play some music for them.

Elizabeth, who had been impatiently waiting to find out the reason for Mr Darcy's elation, heaved a sigh of relief. '*Finally*,' she thought and turned to him. "I am all agog Mr Darcy. What has you so excited all of a sudden?"

Instead of answering, Darcy looked at her searchingly. "*Mr Darcy*? I can understand why you would call me thus when there are chances of being overheard, but now? I - I thought you preferred Alex to Darcy?" he asked, feeling strangely dissatisfied at being addressed so formally by her.

Elizabeth shook her head and smiled. "That was my flawed understanding, Mr Darcy. Now, I very well know that they both are one and the same. Two sides of the same coin, so to say, and... I find that I am unable to prefer one over the other!"

For a moment, Darcy felt confused by her enigmatic statement. However, when he saw the evident approbation in her eyes, he realized with a sudden burst of happiness that he was being increasingly successful in changing her ill-opinion of him. '*Soon - very*

soon I may petition her for a courtship with a hope of a different answer than previously. I do hope Mr Gardiner would not delay his journey home for any reason!” He cleared his throat to dislodge the lump that he found firmly lodged there. “Between the two of us, I would prefer Alex, if ... if it is all the same to you,” he murmured.

As she stared in his dark, fathomless eyes, Elizabeth found herself blushing for no apparent reason! “Very well... Alex, I am still waiting to be told the reason for your happiness,” she said, more in an attempt to change the subject.

Darcy grinned suddenly. “Oh God, Elizabeth! You would never guess in a thousand years what happened today. As her brows shot up in surprise, he leaned forward eagerly. “Today, I went to meet my Uncle Harry for a letter of introduction to an old crony of his – Lord Wentworth. He happens to be employed in a senior position at the war office.”

“You are trying to enquire into Jonathan Webster’s disappearance!” Elizabeth exclaimed, then she slowly studied his smiling countenance and added, “I find it very hard to believe, but your demeanour suggests that you are already aware of Jonathan’s whereabouts. He is alive, isn’t he?” she asked eagerly.

“Ah! It is not at all fair of you to steal my thunder in this manner, Elizabeth.” Darcy shook his head in mock disappointment, then grinned at her again. “Well, you guessed it right! I did go to the war office to enquire about Jonathan. I was worried that I would need Lord Wentworth’s help to get things moving, but it seems Jonathan’s case was already well known. After all, it is not every day that soldiers come back to life from the dead!”

“Oh, I knew it!” Elizabeth smiled in delight. “As soon you informed me that you had gone to war office with that pleased look on your face - I just knew. Please, Alex, tell me fast what had happened to Jonathan and where is he now?” she asked impatiently.

“Well, what had happened to Jonathan was exactly what was presumed by the officers in his unit. He *had* fallen into the river below the ridge after being hit by an enemy bullet. Fortunately for him, he

was saved by a Spanish fisherman, who took him to his home. It appears that apart from the bullet wound, Jonathan suffered some other grievous injuries while falling down. Consequently, it took weeks of care by the fisherman and his family for him to get into a position to find his way back to his unit.”

“Oh, poor Jonathan! Is he well now?”

“He has recovered – to an extent. Jamieson, the personnel at the war office who shared all this information, either could or would not tell the exact nature of Jonathan’s disabilities. However, from what I understood, he is not fit enough to join active duty anytime soon. The most recent communication which was received by the war office from Spain in this regard was sometime in the previous month. It informed them that Jonathan was alive and recuperating. Along with some other soldiers like him, he would be boarding a naval ship bound for England in the first week of April.”

“Oh... then... Jonathan might already be on his way back home!”

“Yes and should most probably be back in England within a se’nnight,” Darcy added.

“But... then... I do not understand! Why has Mrs Webster not been informed of this wonderful piece of news?”

“My question exactly - to Jamieson.”

“And?”

“At first, he was quite ready to disbelieve me. I had to assure him that I had met Mrs Webster only two days ago, and at the time she was completely unaware of these developments. Finally, he agreed to take me to the person responsible for the dispatches.”

“Ah, yes, Jonathan’s friend whom Mrs Webster mentioned. What did *he* tell you?”

“Well, he – a Mr Havisham, was initially very offended at what he considered as accusations of dereliction of duty. He told me very heatedly that he was extremely careful with all dispatches but was especially careful of those meant for the family of our brave soldiers. And in this particular case, he could not dream of being lackadaisical

as Jonathan was a school friend. He assured me that he had delivered the message, personally, to a family member the very same day of its receipt!”

“Ooh... Cyril Webster!” Elizabeth exclaimed.

“Yes, Cyril Webster,” Darcy smiled, his eyes warm with admiration for her quick mind. “It appears that Jonathan and Cyril Webster attended the same school, along with Mr Havisham. Ever since the news of Jonathan’s disappearance was received, Cyril Webster had been in constant touch with Mr Havisham. So, most naturally, he apprised Webster of the miraculous news as soon as he could. Demonstrating unfettered joy at the news, Webster even took the official letter from him on the pretext of delivering it to his grandmother on the very same day,” Darcy added wryly.

“Ah... so that’s why... but I am quite at a loss to understand Cyril’s purpose in hiding the information. After all, Jonathan will be back home in a little while...” Elizabeth mused aloud. “Unless there is some doubt about his recovery?” She raised her brow enquiringly.

“Umm.. no... Jamieson did not mention any such thing. As far as I understand, Jonathan is well on his way to recovery. Frankly, I was equally puzzled about Cyril’s strange conduct and decided to go and meet him without delay. I proceeded to Mr Sandiford’s warehouse directly from the war office, along with a livid Havisham, who absolutely insisted on accompanying me,” Darcy replied with a droll look. “Eventually, it proved to be a very fortunate decision. Noting Havisham’s anger, I initially requested him to wait outside and went to meet Webster on my own. I did this in the hope of preventing any commotion at Mr Sandiford’s warehouse. Unfortunately, Cyril Webster very rudely refused to answer any of my queries. Instead, he asked me to clarify on whose authority I was making all these enquiries. Since Mr Sandiford was not present there at the time, I was at my wits’ end on how to make him talk. When in came Mr Havisham, having had enough of waiting outside.”

Darcy paused to take a breath, then continued with an amused smile at Elizabeth, “After one look at the fulminating Havisham, Webster

lost all his bravado, and it was not long before he revealed all.”

For a moment, Darcy appeared lost in thought as if reliving the said incident. Slowly his face lost all semblance of good humour. “The tale is quite pitiful, Elizabeth, the usual mix of greed and envy fuelled by favourable circumstances. Let me give you a gist. There was a whole lot of whining, crying, and repetition. It would definitely save you some irritation.” He raised an enquiring brow, and at Elizabeth’s nod, continued the tale.

“When Cyril Webster visited Bassingtonstoke for his grandfather’s funeral last year, he mistakenly understood the change in the old man’s will to mean that his grandmother was free to leave the farmhouse to whosoever she wanted. With some vague idea of influencing her to make some provision for *him* in *her* will, he started to visit her regularly. Although a short while later he did understand that his grandmother could not bestow anything to him, he continued to visit her. From what I understood, he was actually quite fond of both his grandparents and was always keen to visit with them when he was younger.”

“He does not seem to be an outright rogue,” Elizabeth murmured.

“Umm... yes... not a rogue, but a man with an abundance of human frailties, I suppose.” Darcy sighed, then took up the tale once again. “It was his resentment at what he considered his grandparents’ unfair partiality for Jonathan that drove him away. The gift of Pegasus to Jonathan was the last straw after which Cyril stopped visiting them altogether. However, these recent visits made him nostalgic for the times gone by and initially, he was only keen to help his grandmother when he came to know of her financial troubles. The first time he suggested that she sell Pegasus, it was with honest intentions. At least that is what *he* says. When his grandmother demurred, he did not press her. However, a short while later, the news of Jonathan’s disappearance came, and everything changed. Like everyone else, Cyril also believed that Jonathan was dead and that *he* now had a real chance at inheriting the farmhouse.” Darcy smiled at the way Elizabeth’s expression underwent a change. “Yes... well... I think now

you can imagine his frustration when Havisham shared the news of Jonathan being alive. His dream of being a landowner in his own right had shattered all too quickly. For a day or two, Webster sat quietly, not really knowing what to do except lament his luck when fate intervened once again.” Darcy paused to draw breath. He could not help grinning as Elizabeth leaned forward eagerly to ask, “Now what had happened?”

“Have some patience, Miss Bennet. We are very near the end of the story now,” he chuckled when Elizabeth rolled her eyes at his teasing.

“You remember I told you that I had heard of Mr Sandiford from somewhere?” Darcy asked suddenly. He continued when Elizabeth nodded. “Well, it was not because of his business dealings, but because one of the colts he owns had won the Derby last year in an upset win. It had caused quite a sensation at the time as he defeated the favourite.”

“Oh,” Elizabeth said as she tried to understand the implications of this disclosure. “Is Mr Sandiford a horse aficionado? Mayhap Cyril Webster thought of selling Pegasus to Mr Sandiford?”

“Ah, it was not as simple as that, Elizabeth. Two days after he received the information about Jonathan, he got to know that Mr Sandiford was looking to purchase a horse as a gift for his only son’s birthday. Can you guess the type of horse he was interested in?” Darcy asked with a wry smile.

“A thoroughbred, preferably a white one?” Elizabeth asked and received a pleased smile in response.

“Exactly, and not only that, but Mr Sandiford was also willing to pay quite an exorbitant sum to fulfil his son’s wishes. I think you can guess the rest of the story. Webster delayed telling his grandmother about his cousin as he wanted Pegasus to be sold before he did so. Since he already knew that his grandmother would not easily agree to sell his cousin’s horse, he hired those ruffians in order to scare her into it,” Darcy said and sat back with a deep sigh.

“Oh! What a despicable rogue,” Elizabeth said angrily. When Darcy raised his brow at her with an amused look, she retorted defensively,

“What? So, I was wrong. We both know that I have a tendency to misjudge people.”

“I do not think so, Elizabeth. Please do not beat yourself up for one mistake,” Darcy said gently. “I believe what you initially thought of Cyril Webster is correct. He is a weak man who was led into this path by his greed and resentment. He believed that his grandmother owed him some reparation and tried to snatch it in this manner. If, in the process, he was able to cause Jonathan some misery, then why not? Anyhow Jonathan would soon be back, once again be his grandmother’s favourite and the heir to it all. However, once Cyril realized that those ruffians were not in his control and were very willing to cause physical harm, he dropped the idea to go ahead with his plan.”

Darcy smiled at Elizabeth’s sceptical look. “I am inclined to believe him because had he persisted with his plan, another attack on Pegasus would already have happened. Now, there is not enough time to stage another attack, convince his grandmother and then arrange for the formalities of the sale of a horse like Pegasus. Jonathan would definitely be back before then.”

“Hmm...” Elizabeth nodded as she pondered on Mr Darcy’s reasoning.

“In fact, from what he told us, Cyril had already decided to go to his grandmother in a day or two and give her the letter from the war office. As Elizabeth listened to Mr Darcy, she was distracted by the strangest of expression on his face.

“Wait a moment, are you saying that... that if we believe what Cyril Webster is saying, then there was no need for you to interfere in this matter... at all?”

Although Darcy’s face was serious his eyes were alight with amusement, “Two days from now, things would have been good for everyone – for Mrs Webster, for Jonathan Webster and for Cyril Webster. Mrs Webster would have received the much-awaited news of her grandson, who would be back home in a few days. You may ask what of Cyril... well, he would be where from where he started. Additionally, he would have been the dear boy, who stood by his

grandmother in tough times, fought with thieves for her, and finally brought her the news of dear Jonathan. Only those attacks would have remained a mystery and would soon have been forgotten as the handiwork of some drunken louts passing through the village. So, the only thing my interference did was to..."

"Expose Cyril Webster! And he deserves every bit of it!" Elizabeth said resolutely. "He might not be a complete blackguard, but I firmly believe that he deserves punishment for scaring and deceiving a kind woman like his grandmother. Especially when she was already facing so many challenges."

"I happen to agree with you, and that's why I am quite pleased with today's work. Now, Cyril will not go scot-free. Earlier, Havisham and I debated what to do, and we decided not to bring Cyril's machinations to the authorities. We agreed that the fall from grace in front of his friends and relatives would be enough of a punishment for him. I also believe that Mrs Webster would not have borne it very well if her grandson were to be prosecuted for an assault on her! The poor lady has already suffered enough," Darcy replied, then looked at her questioningly.

Elizabeth nodded in agreement. "I think what you and Mr Havisham decided is for the best. Umm... will Mr Havisham be sending that letter to Mrs Webster now?"

"He wanted to deliver the message to her personally and will be travelling to Bassingtonstoke tomorrow. But somehow... I did not want Mrs Webster to spend even one more night worrying over Jonathan. So, before I came home, I sent an express rider bearing the message of his return to Bassingtonstoke. I also begged Havisham's pardon for leaving all the difficult explanations to him for his visit on the morrow," Darcy added with a sheepish look. Elizabeth's face softened at yet another instance of his kindness, and the two exchanged a tender smile.

Georgiana, who was just then coming to bid good night to the other two, observed the exchange with pleasure and patted herself on the back for her clever manoeuvres. All the three occupants of the

drawing-room in Darcy House at that moment then retired for the night, quite pleased with the world and themselves.

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## Chapter 16

The Green Room that Mr Darcy had arranged to be allocated for her use was one of the most comfortable and beautiful rooms in which Elizabeth had ever stayed. The cream and moss green colour scheme was at once rich to the eyes and soothing to the senses, and the serene view of the impressive garden below engendered a sense of tranquillity. For the past two days, whenever she had woken up, and in whatever temper, a quarter of an hour spent on the settee by the window had never failed to uplift her spirits. Unfortunately, this morning Elizabeth was unable to achieve her usual contentment. A part of the reason was the difficult letter she had written to Charlotte last night – hiding more than revealing. While she had informed her friend about the accident and her stay at Darcy House necessitated by Mr Gardiner's absence, she had completely glossed over their sojourn in Bassingtonstoke. It had left her vaguely dissatisfied. However, the main reason for her melancholy was one she was very unsuccessfully trying not to acknowledge. It was the awareness that quite soon she would be leaving Darcy House. Maybe as early as tomorrow evening when her uncle was expected back home. The very thought that she might never meet Mr Darcy again was unbearably painful. *'But I will meet him again. He will never rest until Millie is satisfactorily settled and will be visiting Gracechurch Street at least a few times before then,'* she thought. *'But what happens once Millie's future is decided?'* The morose thoughts were not ready to subside. *"If... if Jane and Mr Bingley successfully settle matters between them, then I will be meeting him occasionally.'* Unfortunately, this thought, instead of bringing any respite made her want to weep. She hurriedly pressed her palms to her eyes to stop giving into such pathetic behaviour.

"God, Lizzy! Will you quit moping around?" It seemed that Miss Pesky had enough of being silent! "You rejected him most emphatically and

insultingly just a se'nnight ago. What man would want to renew his proposal after such a miserable experience? Take my advice, and please stop hoping for a renewal of his addresses. If I know anything of men, it is not going to happen anytime soon."

*'But he was so kind and forgiving yesterday,'* Elizabeth whispered to herself.

"He is a kind man - as you are so fond of repeating, but since when does being kind also makes one yearn for reliving misery?"

Elizabeth felt too heartsore to continue arguing with her rude inner voice, which so enjoyed bringing to fore all her hidden fears and doubts! Thankfully there was soon a welcome diversion in the form of Millie, who came bearing something which she held behind her back mysteriously. She was accompanied by a smiling Sarah. *"Ah it seems I am to get another lovely flower to brighten my day,"* Elizabeth thought and smiled tenderly.

"Come in sweetheart," she beckoned to Millie. "Please leave her with me, Sarah. I will call if I need you." The maid left with a nod and a curtsy.

"So, what has Millie brought for me? Shall I make a guess?" Elizabeth asked as the child came to stand next to her.

"Yes! " Mille nodded enthusiastically.

"Is it dolly?"

Millie smiled. "No."

"Hmm... a pink dress?" The child shook her head and grinned again.

"Oh, now I know, it's Ginger!" Elizabeth leaned forward excitedly. Millie squealed, "Noo..." then burst out giggling.

"Well then, I am at a loss, sweetheart. You will have to tell what it is that you have brought me?"

Millie immediately whipped out the flower she had been holding behind her back so patiently. It was the beautiful bud of a red rose that had just begun to unfurl. Elizabeth gasped in delight and took it from the excited child.

“Oh, it is so pretty, my dear. Thank you so much,” she said as she bent down to bestow a kiss on Millie’s forehead. “This time Millie has given the red flower to Beth,” she added teasingly.

“Yes, coz’ Dawcy take yellow one. He said red *be...comes you*.” The child struggled with the unfamiliar words. And just like that, the Green Room regained its usual serenity and Elizabeth her missing contentment! Unfortunately, not for long.

“You wait here, sweetheart. I’ll be back in a moment.” Elizabeth got up to take out a small box of sweetmeats that she kept in her valise. She wanted to offer some to Millie as a small gesture of gratitude for the child’s gentle affection and for brightening Elizabeth’s day with her artlessly revealing talk. Elizabeth carried the valise back to the settee and sat down once again. She opened the valise and absentmindedly took out the book kept at the top and placed it on the settee. She had just put her hand back inside the valise to rummage for the box of sweetmeats when an excited cry from Millie distracted her.

“Gran-ma!” The child cried as she picked up her grandmother’s bible that Elizabeth had put down on the settee. *‘Oh, Lord, I hope Millie will not start asking for...’* Even before Elizabeth could complete the thought, Millie asked, “Where is Gran-ma?”

Elizabeth swallowed hard and said, “Umm... your grandmother is staying with a friend, Millie.” She decided to maintain the narrative that Mrs Webster had suggested.

“Bring Gran-ma here.”

“Your Gran-ma is not well, child. She would not be able to travel for such a long distance at present,” Elizabeth hedged, not knowing what else to do.

“Take Millie there,” the child urged and to Elizabeth’s horror, her lips started to tremble, eyes glittering with unshed tears.

“The place is very far off, my dear. How will we go there?”

“With Dawcy,” Millie replied simply.

“Very well, we all will go in a few days,” Elizabeth promised a little

desperately.

“No! Na ow! Millie wants her Gran-ma na-ow.” And with a wail, the child burst into tears. Elizabeth tried her best to distract the little girl. Unfortunately, none of the enticements - from sweetmeat to toys, to a game of ‘hide and seek’ were any good. Millie continued to sob pitifully, asking for her grandmother. After a while, feeling concerned for the child’s health, Elizabeth decided to take her to Mr Darcy. She felt like a failure for seeking Mr Darcy’s help to manage a distraught little girl, but Millie had left her no choice.

“All right, let us go and find Mr Darcy and see what he says, shall we?” When the weeping child nodded wordlessly, Elizabeth picked her up and made her way towards the door.

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When she reached downstairs, she asked the footman in the hall for Mr Darcy and was told that he and Miss Darcy were in the morning room.

Darcy and Georgiana got up from their seats in consternation as Elizabeth entered the morning room with a quietly sobbing Millie.

“What has happened, Elizabeth? Why is Millie crying?” a concerned Georgiana asked, and both siblings swiftly made their way towards Elizabeth.

Elizabeth offered an unhappy glance tinged with guilt for precipitating this situation with her carelessness. “I... Millie wants to be taken to Mrs Dawson. She saw her grandmother’s bible and...” Elizabeth broke off, glancing uneasily down at the child in her arms and mouthed, “I am sorry,” to her audience.

“There is no need for an apology, E.. Miss Bennet. This was inevitable. If not today, then a few days later,” Darcy said quietly, then addressed Millie. “Come here, poppet.” And took the child in his arms.

“I... I told Millie that her grandmother is still not well, and she is staying at a place very far from here, but...” Elizabeth hurried to let Darcy know what she had conveyed to Millie.

“Hmm... so, Millie knows that her grandmother is not well, does she?” Darcy glanced at Millie enquiringly.

The child nodded unhappily. “Then shall we not first send a message to your grandmother and let her know we want to visit her. What will we do if we reach there and find she is resting? Millie would not want to disturb her Gran-ma, would she?”

Millie shook her head hesitantly. It was apparent that she was not happy with the situation and was reluctantly agreeing to Darcy’s suggestion. It pained him to put emotional pressure on the child in addition to concealing the truth from her. However, he really did not know how to handle the situation otherwise. It was getting more and more apparent that they needed to disclose the fact of her grandmother’s passing with Millie. However, they could not do so now when the child was already distressed and her future so uncertain.

“Send message now,” Millie’s voice brought him back from his reverie. “Very well, sweetheart. I will do so immediately.” Darcy perjured his soul with a heavy heart. With a nod, Millie rested her head on his shoulder.

Despite his assurance, the child continued to sob intermittently. Darcy sighed, trying to come up with a way to soothe Millie, to bring back the smile on her face. “Would you like to go for a picnic, poppet?” he finally asked.

“Millie raised her head to look at him, and for a moment, Darcy believed that she was going to refuse. Instead, the child asked, “Can I take Ginga?”

Darcy had never travelled in a carriage with an animal inside it. Moreover, he was not sure how the kitten would behave cooped up inside a carriage, but as he looked at the hopeful expression on Millie’s face, he knew he would agree, even if he had to travel the whole distance with a kitten on his lap. It was one wish of the child he *could* grant, and he did.

“Very well, poppet, you can take Ginger with you,” he conceded and was rewarded with a smile. Granted, it was a shadow of the child’s

usual sunny one, but it was a start.

“I will ask Sarah to dress Millie up for the picnic, shall I?” When the child nodded, Darcy immediately sent for the maid.

After Millie left the room with Sarah, all the three adults in the room collectively took a relieved breath. “I must say that you handled an extremely fraught situation rather skilfully, brother. Millie minds you so well that it is difficult to believe that it is not even three full days since you met her,” Georgiana said admiringly. At that, Darcy and Elizabeth exchanged a quick guilty glance then Darcy cleared his throat. “Yes... well, somehow, I have felt a strange bond with Millie from the moment I picked her up from that carriage, mayhap, Millie also experiences the same,” he said, and Georgiana nodded understandingly.

For a while, there was an uneasy silence in the room as its occupants pondered over the unfortunate events that had brought things to such a pass for them all, but especially for poor Millie. The silence was broken by Darcy as he addressed the room at large. “Although I have promised a picnic to Millie, I really am not sure where to take her for it. I do not want to visit any place that is teeming with strange people. The little one is already disturbed enough,” he said. It was one reason he could openly state for not wanting to visit crowded public places. However, another unstated one was his reluctance to give rise to gossip that would most certainly raise its head if he was seen publicly accompanying an unknown young woman along with a child to boot.

“I know just the place, Fitzwilliam!” Georgiana said excitedly.

When Darcy looked at her enquiringly, she replied with a pleased smile, “We can go to Cranfield Park.” Cranfield Park was home to Sebastian Fitzwilliam, Viscount Raymore, the eldest son of Lord Matlock. It was an impressive manor estate located in Surrey, nearly ten miles south of the Darcy house. While it was an inspired choice for a picnic outing, as far as Darcy knew, Sebastian and his wife, Emily, were not in Surrey at present. “Umm... I thought Sebastian was planning to go back to Derbyshire for Emily’s confinement?”

“Yes, he and Emily did go back, the week before last. I visited them

just before they left as I wanted to paint the Crepe Myrtle next to Sebastian's study. I had assumed it would be in full bloom, unfortunately quite a lot of green was still visible, and I was unable to get the effect I wanted. Sebastian suggested that I come again after some time and promised to leave instructions with Matten. So even if Sebastian is not there, Matten would be expecting us."

"Excellent, let us go to Cranfield then. Hopefully, Millie would enjoy its wide, beautiful gardens, and you would get that tree in exactly the state you want for your sketch," Darcy said in a relieved voice. "Will you be ready to leave in half an hour?" Although he asked Georgiana, his eyes strayed to Elizabeth.

Before Elizabeth could nod in response, Georgiana chirped in with, "Make it an hour, brother, and you will find us ready and at the front door!"

Darcy assumed an expression of long-suffering and protested. "I really do not understand why you need so much time to get ready for a small outing to your cousin's home where there would be no one else but family. But I already know from experience that asking you to hurry up is not going to do me any good."

For Elizabeth, it was a bittersweet moment to be ever so carelessly included in his family. Although she knew it was only a figure of speech and not some hidden message, her poor heart refused to understand that and managed to perform the almost impossible feat of jumping up to her throat. Afraid that her longing would be plainly visible on her face, she hurriedly turned her head to look out of the window, just as Georgiana laughingly replied to her brother's complaint, "I believe one day you will thank me for already preparing you for what is going to be a regular occurrence in your life once you marry - patiently waiting for the females in your family to get ready for outings."

Even as Darcy felt surprised at the uncharacteristically bold nature of his sister's teasing, he could not help stealing a glance at Elizabeth at the sudden mention of his marriage. He found her gazing out of the window with a most becoming blush on her face and indulged in some

intense gazing of his own. Georgiana observed the stolen glance and the pleasing blush on Elizabeth's face with satisfaction. Things seemed to be progressing well!

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The journey to Cranfield was accomplished in an uneventful manner. Much to Darcy's relief, Ginger had deigned to travel very peacefully in a basket prepared for him by Mrs Higgins. Millie, though still not back to her usual lively self, had also rallied to a large extent. She spent much of the journey peering interestedly out of the window as was her wont during a carriage ride.

Cranfield was a beautiful estate. Though the manor house itself was not especially large, the well-manicured gardens surrounding it were very impressive, as were the outer foliage that seemed to have been maintained in a fashion to give an appearance of being in a completely natural state. Elizabeth looked around with interest as Mr Darcy helped her out of the carriage. *'A walk around the paths through these groves would be very invigorating. I hope I get some time to...'*

Darcy leaned towards her and promptly answered her unfinished thoughts. "Do not worry, Elizabeth, we will go for a long refreshing walk as soon as we have had something to eat," Elizabeth glanced at him, "Er... how did you know?" she asked in surprise and got a playful smile in response. "You should have seen your face when you were climbing down from the carriage." She flushed at this evidence of his uncanny ability to read her thoughts but replied with tolerable composure, "I would like that very much."

As they reached the front door, they heard the Fitzwilliams' butler, Matten, welcoming Georgiana with a pleased smile. "You have come at a very propitious time, miss, that tree of yours is now a riot of colour. I am sure you will be able to finish your painting this time," he said, and his smile widened as Georgiana hurried inside. He then ushered the rest of their party inside. If he was curious about an unknown young lady and a child accompanying the Darcy siblings, he was too well trained to let it show on his face.

In her eagerness to pick up on her sketch at the earliest, Georgiana proposed that they have the picnic in the garden with the Crepe Myrtle and everyone else was happy to go along with her suggestion. By the time they had all had refreshed themselves, Matten had swiftly arranged for some garden chairs and rugs in the particular garden. He had also placed Georgiana's easel and other painting paraphernalia as per her directions. The sumptuous repast they had brought from Darcy House was spread on a table nearby along with some select offerings from Cranfield - such as the freshly picked strawberries from its gardens and the exotic oranges from its hothouse. As they all stepped out, Elizabeth glanced around curiously. She found the garden to be pretty enough, but there was nothing truly noteworthy there. She had just started to wonder at Georgiana's interest in it when her gaze fell on a tree, or rather a large shrub standing proudly, a short distance away, and she gasped involuntarily. It appeared as if the shrub was on fire. The whole of its upper part was awash with large clumps of exotic, bright red flowers, and there were so many of them that one could make out the leaves hidden behind only if one was specifically looking for them. "Ah... now I understand..." Elizabeth murmured almost to herself, but Darcy standing next to her heard her. "Yes... magnificent, isn't it?" he asked, just as Georgiana called out to them to hurry up.

They all enjoyed a leisurely meal, except for Georgiana, who rushed through hers to go and sit at her easel. The eager painter also had a very interested young audience - an extremely fascinated Millie who stared open-mouthed as the fiery image started took shape on the canvas.

A suitable interval after the meal was over, Darcy asked Elizabeth, "Would you like a tour around the estate now, Miss Bennet?"

Elizabeth smiled. "If you had waited another few moments to ask, I was on the verge of inviting *you* for the tour, sir," she replied impishly as she got up from the rug and smoothened her dress.

Darcy gave an appreciative chuckle, then asked Mrs Annesley, "Mrs Annesley, we are going for a walk around the estate. Would you like

to accompany us?”

“I have been meaning to read this book of poems for quite some time, Mr Darcy. I would much rather sit under a tree and enjoy it,” Mrs Annesley replied as she pointed to a slim volume in her hand.

“I cannot really fault your choice, ma’am. Please enjoy your book. ” Darcy smiled at her as he went to Millie.

“Come, poppet, we will go visit a beautiful pool,” he called out to the child.

“Millie and Ginga sit with Miss Dawcy.”

Darcy’s brow rose at the child’s firm tones. He opened his mouth to cajole her when Georgiana interrupted him, “Let her be, brother,” she said.

“Are you sure?” Darcy asked doubtfully. “You usually do not like distractions while you are painting.”

“I will mind her, Mr Darcy, you and Miss Bennet go for your walk with an easy mind,” Mrs Annesley assured him in Georgiana’s stead.

“Thank you, Mrs Annesley,” Darcy bowed to her, then he and Elizabeth made their way out of the garden towards the back of the house.

Had he chosen to look back at that moment, he would have been very shocked to see the very dignified and proper Mrs Annesley share a mischievous, conspiratorial smile with his sister.

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As they came out of the house, Elizabeth paused for a moment, and Darcy stopped beside her with his brow raised questioningly. She smiled at him in response and slowly twirled around on the spot where she stood - taking in every little detail of her surroundings. “This place is beautiful. The exceptional manner in which the house and its surroundings blend it gives the onlooker an impression of complete harmony and peace,” she murmured.

“There is no doubt Cranfield is very pretty, and I do not want to take

anything away from Sebastian's beautifully maintained estate but wait till you see Pemberley. I cannot begin to imagine your pleasure as you see for the first time our lake and the dense groves behind it," Darcy replied with a quick smile of anticipation.

There it was once again - the almost careless affirmation that she was more than a casual acquaintance, that her company was sought after and looked forward to. Her foolish heart performed another flip leaving her breathless like earlier. For a moment, she found it difficult to speak. She wanted to express her keen desire to visit the home for which his love was so very apparent. However, she did not know how to do that without appearing to be angling for an invitation. After a while, she murmured noncommittally, "I will take your word for it, Alex."

Feeling upset with this strange neediness that appeared to have gripped her ever since she discovered that she had fallen in love, she tried to change the subject. "Cranfield is Lord Raymore's principal estate?" she asked as she once again started to move.

"Ah... no. Being the eldest grandson, Sebastian inherited Cranfield from his mother's father. His principal estate, a much larger one, is in Derbyshire," Darcy replied, looking at her askance.

"Hmm..."

"What?" Darcy asked.

"Er... what?" Elizabeth feigned surprise.

"Come on, Elizabeth, I believe I have now learnt to read your expressions quite well. You wanted to say something then held back. Tell me?"

Elizabeth sighed; it seemed he had learnt to read her rather well. "I just thought that ... while our primogeniture system of inheritance does have its good points, in some ways, it is quite unfair."

Darcy raised his brows, signalling her to explain her thoughts further.

"At Rosings, Colonel Fitzwilliam once told me that for a second son like him it is imperative that he marry an heiress." As Elizabeth paused for a breath, Darcy's heart immediately twisted in anxiety,

‘Why was Richard talking about marriage to Elizabeth? Did he admire her? More importantly, does she admire him?’ he thought as he anxiously glanced at her. His anxiety lessened when she continued with a careless shrug of her shoulders, “At that time, except for a cursory thought that it was the lot of second sons everywhere, I had not paid much attention. But now... now that I see all this...” She gestured vaguely with her hands and continued, “And then hear about another principal estate, I realize that our inheritance laws *are* quite unfair in some ways.” Darcy was quite relieved to notice the almost academic nature of her discourse. There were no personal emotions involved there.

“I suppose what happened with the Websters has made me more conscious about this. One can almost... understand why Cyril Webster did what he did,” Elizabeth finished her thought.

“Oh, I grant you that our inheritance laws are quite unfair to the second or any subsequent sons. I will also grant you that there could be a justifiable cause of resentment among the aforementioned sons or other relatives, but then nothing can justify criminal behaviour in lieu of that resentment.”

“Oh, I never meant...”

“Of course, you did not, Elizabeth,” Darcy said and then stopped all of sudden with an expectant smile on his face. Elizabeth had been gazing askance at him, at his sudden change in expression, she turned her head to look in the front.

“Oh!” she said as she gazed in delight at the beautiful pool in front of her. “The viscount and his lady are truly blessed to have such natural beauty in and around their home,” Elizabeth murmured softly.

“Ah, but this pool is not exactly *natural*. While a stream did use to flow from here, Sebastian used it to have this pool constructed for Emily,” Darcy replied then grinned mischievously. “I never knew my cousin to be such a romantic, but it seems he proposed to her in front of a pool at a friend’s estate and got the setting reconstructed just before their marriage.”

“How very sweet of him!” Elizabeth exclaimed as she gazed at the

clear waters on which sunlight was making beautiful patterns. "Oh, how I wish, I could dip my feet in these cool waters," she said wistfully.

"Why don't you?"

"Er... why don't I do what?"

"Dip your feet in the pool?"

"You cannot be serious, Alex!"

"I am... very."

"But..."

"First listen to what I am suggesting, Elizabeth. Being the thorough gentleman that I am," he quirked his brow at her, and Elizabeth flushed at the reminder of how she had accused him of not being a gentleman. However, before she could react, he continued, "I would turn my back while you remove your shoes... and..." he coloured and gestured vaguely. Elizabeth grinned at his endearing discomfort, forgetting her own. "When you are ready, and it is safe for me to turn back... just let me know," he said, suiting his words to action.

Elizabeth stared at his broad back, torn between her desire to wade in the pool and her disinclination to appear the hoyden before him. Then she remembered how she had appeared in the Netherfield parlour that morning so long ago, having walked three miles on muddy lanes. For all her out of the ordinary behaviour, *he* had not held it against her! She smiled and sat on a nearby boulder to remove her shoes and stockings. She quickly folded the stockings and kept them in her pocket, as she knew that as hard as it had been to remove them, putting them on, especially on her wet feet, would be impossible. '*What would Georgiana and Mrs Annesley think if they notice that I am without my stockings,*' she wondered uneasily.

"When do you ever think before you leap, Lizzy?"

"Grr.." An irritated Elizabeth made an inarticulate sound to shoo off Miss Pesky, and to spite her, got up, lifted her gown to her ankles and waded in the pool. Although, she stopped only after taking a couple of steps. Had it not been so sunny, the cold water would have been

shocking, but with the warmth of the sun beating down on her, it was - refreshing. 'Oh, this is heavenly,' she whispered and closed her eyes ecstatically. Then she remembered that poor Mr Darcy was still standing with his back to her! She turned towards him, opened her mouth to call out. However, some imp of mischief made her pick up a handful of water and throw it at him instead. Unfortunately for Darcy, he was standing near enough to her for the cold droplets of water to scatter all over him suddenly.

"What the..." He swivelled towards her in shock and saw her gazing back with an endearing expression in which guilt and mischief were fighting each other for supremacy.

"Really, Miss Bennet? I thought you were intelligent enough to pick up your fights wisely, but it seems I was wrong." He smiled at her wolfishly as he moved towards her.

For almost a se'nnight, she had only seen the most gentle and gentlemanly side of Mr Darcy, and therefore quite stupidly, she had not expected him to retaliate. Now as she saw him coming forward, she mumbled, "Oh... no... I did not mean it...really, Alex." Her voice rose a little at his name. She did not even wait to think what would be his retribution but instinctively turned to hurry out towards a big boulder sitting in the middle of the pool. Unfortunately, in her hurry, she twisted her foot and started to fall.

"Careful, Elizabeth!" Darcy exclaimed as he lunged forward to catch hold of her. Once he had steadied her, he looked down at her upturned face, and his breath hitched. With her wide eyes and softly parted lips, she looked so beautiful and utterly desirable that he almost bent down to taste those pink lips to ascertain if they were as soft and sweet as they appeared. The urge was so strong that even the thought that he was sure to get a slap for his actions was not enough of a deterrent, and he went ahead and cupped her face in his hands. 'Only a few minutes ago you claimed that you were a thorough gentleman, Darcy!' It was only his sardonic inner voice that finally cut through the haze of desire. With a sigh, he gently brushed his thumbs across her cheeks, then dropped his hands and stepped back.

“A... are you well?” he asked huskily, desperately hoping to cover up his gaffe.

Elizabeth, who, till a moment ago, had believed she was going to receive her first kiss and had shocked herself by wantonly desiring it, blinked at him. Confusion and disappointment warred within her at his abrupt withdrawal, and she found herself nodding without thought.

“I... I was only planning to scoop some water and return the favour, but I appeared to have scared you very much. I am sorry, Elizabeth,” he said quietly.

He appeared so woebegone that Elizabeth found herself wanting to assure him. “You do not have to apologise, Alex, and I was not scared. I was only hoping to escape a well-deserved dunking that I felt was coming my way by rushing out to that boulder there. I still plan to go and sit on it for a while, if I may?” She asked, abruptly wishing for some distance between them to help her straighten out her muddled thinking.

“Of course, shall I assist you?” He offered his hand, all set to lead her to the boulder.

Elizabeth looked down and absentmindedly noted that by some lucky chance he had caught hold of her while still staying at the edge of the pool. She also observed his gleaming boots, which he seemed to have forgotten and suddenly grinned up at him. “I do not think Mr Banes will ever forgive me if I allow you to do so.”

“Excuse me?” Darcy asked, thunderstruck.

“Yes... well, from Mr Lonsdale at the inn, I came to know that Mr Banes is very proud of the exceptional sheen of your boots. I do not think he will forgive me if I am responsible for you ruining yet another pair of Hessians.”

“Lonsdale was talking about my Hessians at the inn?” Elizabeth looked at his thoroughly befuddled expression and let out an involuntary giggle. “Yes, of course, and the man is so enamoured of their stupendous shine that he got his valet to approach Mr Banes for

the secret,” she informed him with a straight face.

“Lonsdale always was a numbskull! I hope he was not too disappointed when Banes sent away his man with a flea in his ears!”

“How are you so sure that Mr Banes did not share his secret with Mr Lonsdale’s man?” she asked curiously.

Darcy grinned at her, then lowered his voice conspiratorially, “Just between you and me, Elizabeth, Banes has not shared his secret even with me!”

“What! You are funning, aren’t you?” she asked, grinning back at him.”

He shook his head dolefully. “Of course not. Banes guards his secret very zealously.”

Elizabeth stared at him in amazement, and realizing that he was in earnest, she burst out in giggles at the ludicrous situation. Soon his rich baritone voice joined her, and the awkwardness that had sprung up between them quickly melted away

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Once the recent awkwardness between them had disappeared, they had an extremely interesting conversation across the pool! It was on varied topics like their tastes in literature, the places they would like to visit, friends and families, and even women’s rights! Both enjoyed their bantering so much that they completely lost track of the time, and it was getting quite late when they started on their way back to the house.

Darcy had noted the growing amity between them with pleasure, but it also gave rise to a strange restlessness within him. It was less than a week since he decided to ask her for a courtship, but somehow it felt as if he had been waiting forever to do so, and it led to a fierce argument within him for the appropriate course of action. *‘Why should I wait anymore when I can see that she is more sympathetic towards me now? But... she is still under your protection, and it is not gentlemanly to take advantage of a lady in this manner. Anyhow, her uncle will be back*

tomorrow. In only a few more days, you can open up to her. But... what if she goes back to Meryton before I could do that?" Even though the distance between London and Meryton was less than thirty miles, to him, it felt almost like a chasm!

He glanced askance at her as they walked side by side. "Elizabeth?"

"Hmm?"

"In all probability, your uncle would be back home tomorrow. How... how soon would you and Miss Bennet be travelling back to Meryton?"

Elizabeth stopped walking and turned towards him with a surprised look on her face. "But... how can I leave before Millie's future is settled? I am not sure if Jane would want to stay here any further, but I will have to stay for Millie."

A wave of relief passed over Darcy. He had been meaning to ask Elizabeth if she would want to leave Millie at Darcy House under the care of Sarah, Georgie, and Mrs Annesley. After all, she was dependent on her uncle's goodwill to keep Millie with her in Gracechurch Street. However, now he dropped the idea. Unless Mr Gardiner espoused a reluctance to house an unknown orphan child in his home, he would let things be. It would give him a ready excuse to regularly call on Elizabeth. He could then ask for a courtship in a more... appropriate manner.

"Of course, how foolish of me to forget," he murmured. As they resumed walking, he observed that Elizabeth appeared subdued all of a sudden. *'Perhaps she is once again worrying over Millie,'* he thought and tried to reassure her. "Please do not worry Elizabeth, I will keep you updated about the progress in this matter regularly." Elizabeth smiled at him. "I know that, Alex. I just hope Charlotte can provide us with some relevant information," she said.

"I hope so too. Anyhow, we would know soon enough. Stephen should be back from Hunsford by tomorrow morning at the latest."

Elizabeth had been surprised when Mr Darcy had sent his own footman on the errand of an express messenger to Hunsford this morning. "Are you confident that someone at Rosings will not

recognize Stephen?" she couldn't help asking him now.

"Oh, yes. I chose Stephen for the task because he has joined the household quite recently. Neither my aunt nor Anne has visited Darcy House since then. I believe Richard is the only one who may know him. Anyhow, my aunt usually walks with her nose so high in the air that I have my doubts that she will recognize even Higgins if she meets him somewhere outside of my home!"

Elizabeth felt a laugh bubbling up at his words that she swiftly converted into a cough. "Umm... it is a relief to know that." When Darcy grinned at her, she realized how her words were open to misinterpretation and corrected hurriedly, "Erm... I meant it is a relief to know that there is no danger of Stephen being recognized at Rosings."

His grin widened. "Of course, what else you could have meant, Elizabeth."

"Dawcy, Beth!" They both turned to look in the direction of Millie's voice and saw the little girl hurrying towards them with Ginger in her arms. She was followed more sedately by Georgiana and Mrs Annesley. Millie had somehow cajoled Georgiana into carrying Ginger's basket.

"Slow down, poppet. We are coming to you." Darcy cautioned the eager child as he and Elizabeth quickened their pace.

The area where all in the party from Darcy House had unexpectedly converged was near a junction where three paths met. The path on which Darcy and Elizabeth were walking led to the pool, the second one on which Millie and the other two ladies were present led to the manor house. Finally, there was the third one which led to a road leading out of Cranfield. Approximately eighty yards from the junction, the third path curved near a dense grove of shrubs. It made it impossible for anyone on the other two paths to see anything beyond the groves on the third.

Despite Darcy's words, the eager child hurried towards them, and in her excitement, her arms around the kitten loosened. Taking immediate advantage, Ginger jumped down and dashed towards the

junction.

With a cry of alarm, Millie immediately tried to give chase. "Stop, Ginga!" she cried as she hurried after the kitten.

For some reason, the kitten halted as soon as it crossed the junction towards the grove. Consequently, Millie soon caught up with it. Darcy, who had also started running towards the kitten, stopped when he saw the truant being picked up. His indulgent smile was however replaced by a look of horror, as he first heard the sound of thundering hooves and then saw a large stallion emerging from behind the groves, ridden at a high speed. His blood froze as he recognized that it was 'Thunder' - the newest, most skittish addition to Sebastian's stables!

"Millie, move away from the path! Move, child!" he shouted as he sprinted towards the little girl with all his might. But her fear of horses had already overcome Millie, and she stood motionless, staring in terror at the oncoming horse. That the distance between the horse and the child was almost twice that between him and Millie was the only thing in his favour as Darcy rushed towards her. By then, even the horrified groom on Thunder had noticed the motionless child in his path, and he frantically tried to bring the horse to a halt. Regrettably, the distance was too short and the speed too high.

By the time Darcy desperately dove forward to fling Millie away from under the horse's hooves, it was almost on top of them. Unfortunately, he was not as lucky himself. Even as he rolled away from its path, his head struck a large piece of flint, half buried in the ground. Immediately, there was intense pain, and then... it was all chaos. People were shouting, a horse was shrieking, and there were sounds of running feet.

He heard the panicked cries of 'Fitz!' and 'Alex!' as he lay on the ground, losing consciousness. The last thing he saw before everything turned black was Mrs Annesley rushing forward to pick up Millie in her arms.

It was not many minutes later that a semiconscious Darcy began to hear an insistent voice. It appeared to be coming from a long distance away. He frowned in concentration and heard it calling him

repeatedly. “Alex! Oh, please, wake up, Alex!” The tense voice kept repeating the words almost like a chant. His head was resting on something soft, and he did not feel like opening his eyes, especially as his head ached abominably. But the rising distress in the voice above finally forced him to try and open his eyes. However, he failed in his efforts at first.

“Look, Elizabeth, there is a movement under his eyelids! He seems to be waking up.” Darcy recognized the excited and hopeful voice of his sister.

“Oh, thank the good Lord! I hope the apothecary comes along soon!” *‘Elizabeth!’* Darcy thought as the relief in both the voices made him try to open his eyes once again. It was difficult and painful, but finally, he did manage it. He blinked to clear his vision, looked at the face hovering above his own and despite the ache in his head, felt as if he had woken up in his favourite dream!

He was lying with his head in Elizabeth’s lap, and the emotions blazing in her eyes were all that he had ever hoped to witness in them. The only thing not to his liking was the tears glistening in her beautiful eyes. Even as he watched in silence, a tear spilt from her right eye and fell on his cheek.

“Please do not cry, Elizabeth. I am well,” he managed to croak with difficulty.

Like him, Elizabeth seemed to be having trouble speaking. So, she swallowed hard and nodded, and a tremulous smile soon began on her face. Try as he might, Darcy couldn’t tear his eyes away from her dear, beautiful face.

When she had seen Elizabeth’s reaction to her brother falling unconscious, Georgiana had understood that the older girl loved her brother deeply. However, soon after, the worry for Fitzwilliam had driven all other thoughts from her mind. Now, as she stood blushing at the intense look being exchanged between her brother and Elizabeth, she realized that their feelings were mutual and felt very happy for them. Feeling as though she was intruding, she glanced away from them, and her gaze fell on something on the ground that

glinted when sunlight fell on it. It was lying very near to where the accident had taken place. Curious, she walked up to it. There, lying on the ground, was a broken gold chain and attached to it was a disfigured locket. The locket seemed to have been hit by something with a large force. Not only was it somewhat mangled, but it had fallen open in two parts! *'The horse seems to have landed on the locket with full force,'* Georgiana thought as she bent to pick it up. *'I have seen this locket somewhere... Oh, yes, I saw it on Millie,'* she mused as she flipped the locket to see what was on the other side. There was a miniature of a young woman on one side. *'Hmm... mayhap, this is Millie's mother.'* She froze as her gaze came to rest on the miniature of a slightly older man on the other side. *'Oh, wait, I know this man!'*

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Chapter 17

When Georgiana returned to her brother's side, it was to see him standing up and surrounded by several people. There was Matten, hovering protectively around him. The butler was accompanied by a couple of footmen, Siddons, the head groom in Sebastian's stable, and finally, a cowering young lad. Elizabeth and Mrs Annesley, with Millie in her arms, were standing at a small distance from the group of men. Mrs Annesley had somehow managed to soothe a terrified Millie, who was now asleep in the good lady's arms.

Georgiana soon gathered from the men's talk that an angry Siddons was advocating the dismissal of the scared looking young man. He was the unfortunate groom riding Thunder when the accident happened. Luckily for the groom, her brother was unwilling to blame the hapless man for the accident. By the time he had pacified Siddons and, the stable staff left the site of the accident, the apothecary came calling. Only when the man of medicine gave his permission did their party remove to the manor house. Although the apothecary did not find anything concerning after examining Darcy and Millie, he advised against travel that day. He also provided some powders for relieving pain and inflammation, and then left after asking both his patients to take ample rest. A maid then came to help settle Millie for the night, and Mrs Annesley decided to accompany the little girl.

As they waited for their rooms to be prepared, Georgiana took the opportunity to share her discovery with Elizabeth and her brother.

"Brother?" she got up and made her way to the couch on which Darcy was sitting.

"Yes, Georgie?"

"I found this near the site of the accident," she said and offered the

chain and locket to her brother.

“Oh, that is Millie’s locket! Sadly, Thunder seems to have stomped on it,” Darcy said as he took the locket from Georgiana and almost unconsciously flipped the two parts open to glance at the miniatures.

“Hey! Doesn’t this man look like Geoffrey Baldwin...” Darcy broke off and then looked wide-eyed at his sister. “Oh... no!”

“Aunt Mel!” The brother and the sister exclaimed almost simultaneously.

“So that is why Millie’s eyes are so familiar,” Georgiana whispered. “But... Geoffrey had married about two years ago, and Millie is ...” she began in puzzlement then broke off. “Oh!” she blushed painfully and looked away from her brother, who appeared equally embarrassed.

“Who is Aunt Mel?” Elizabeth asked finally when the dismayed silence between the siblings had lasted quite long.

Darcy sighed heavily, then answered, “Melissa Baldwin, Lady Vincent. She was not really a relation, but a very dear friend of our mother. However, she loved Georgie and me nearly as much as our Aunt Susan. More so after our mother died. She also passed away nearly five years ago.” He glanced away and reluctantly added, “The miniature of the man in Millie’s locket is that of her son Geoffrey Baldwin. It now appears that Baldwin is Millie’s father.”

“But... we do not know how Millie’s mother came by that locket. How can we be sure that... this Geoffrey Baldwin is Millie’s father?” Elizabeth objected.

“Because of Millie’s eyes, Elizabeth.” This time it was Georgiana who answered. “They are the exact replica of her grandmother’s. Aunt Mel had the kindest and the warmest, violet coloured eyes which always twinkled when she laughed,” she added.

“Millie’s eyes,” Elizabeth whispered.

Georgiana nodded. “When I first saw Millie in my brother’s arms, I was very puzzled by the wave of familiarity that washed over me. Now I find it strange that I did not think of Aunt Mel at all at the

time,” she said in a surprised voice.

“It is quite understandable, Georgie. You were only eleven when she passed away. I was much older, and still, I did not connect those eyes to Aunt Mel’s, even when I wondered where I had seen them before!” Darcy shook his head in amazement. “But at least now I understand why I have felt a connection with little Millie from the very first moment. After all, she is Aunt Mel’s own flesh and blood!” he added reflectively.

After a while, Elizabeth asked diffidently. “Umm... do the Baldwins’ have a home in Bath?”

“You are nothing if not tenacious, Miss Bennet.” Just for a moment, the troubled look in Darcy’s eyes was replaced by a glint of amusement. “And yes, the Baldwins’ do own a home in Bath,” he added with a troubled frown.

“So... what do we do now?” Elizabeth asked when the silence grew oppressive.

“I believe Geoffrey Baldwin would be in town for the season, as is his habit. I will send a message to him now, asking him to meet me tomorrow at Darcy House,” Darcy replied.

“But will he respond?” Georgiana asked doubtfully. “Strangely, we have never had much communication with Aunt Mel’s family once she passed on,” she added to explain away her uncertainty.

“I think he will, especially now,” Darcy said with a grim smile. He did not tell Georgiana that they never did have a very cordial relationship with Aunt Mel’s family because of Lord Vincent’s cold attitude. While Geoffrey Baldwin and his elder brother were the kind of rakish ne’er do wells he had always kept a distance from.

“Why especially now?” Georgiana persisted.

“Because Lord Vincent is interested in a strip of land from Glenmore Park that borders their estate in Scotland.”

“I think that one belongs to Geoffrey ever since his marriage,” Georgiana added helpfully.

“Exactly, that is why Baldwin will come when I send a message. I had

entered a negotiation with Lord Vincent a few months back. It is taking so much time as I was unable to decide whether to sell... or not. Now I think my decision will depend on how Baldwin responds," Darcy said grimly.

Just then, Matten came to tell them that their rooms had been prepared. Darcy told him about his requirements for the stationery as well as a messenger.

The accident had already cast a pall on their party. It had pained Darcy that Millie had suffered another setback just when they had tried to cheer her up. Now, this latest discovery only added to his disquiet. Supper that evening was, therefore, a solitary affair as everyone took a tray in their rooms. As Darcy retired for the night, he pondered over his forthcoming meeting with Geoffrey Baldwin and Millie's future. He had already promised himself to ensure that Millie was settled in a loving home where she would be well cared for. Now with the additional awareness of her connection to Aunt Mel, his resolve had only increased. Unfortunately, the revelation of her father's identity instead of bringing the expected relief brought doubts and uncertainties. Although Lord Vincent was considered a fair and just man by the ton, Darcy knew that he was, in reality, a cold and indifferent sort of person. He had seen its evidence many a time in Aunt Mel's eyes. And the less said about that rake Geoffrey, the better. However, he owed it to both Millie and Aunt Mel to try and settle the little girl with her own family. *'But only if they truly want her.'* On this thought, he closed his eyes for the night.

The next morning, he was quite impatient to leave for Darcy House. Elizabeth and Georgiana both remonstrated with him to take things slowly and be more careful of his injury. However, he was too restless to stay at Cranfield Park even a minute more than was necessary. His forthcoming interview with Baldwin and the knowledge of Mr Gardiner's return both were making him edgy. Consequently, they left for Darcy House soon after breakfast.

Darcy sanded the letter he had written to Mr Gardiner and put it on the tray holding the outgoing messages, to be sent out later in the day. As he absentmindedly continued to gaze at the letter, his thoughts wandered in the same direction they often did these days - towards Elizabeth. *'If whatever Elizabeth has told me of her uncle is correct, I suppose Mr Gardiner will be accompanying the messenger back to Darcy House.'* Just for a moment, a smile quirked his lips at the thought, then disappeared. *'And she... she will be gone from my home by the time the sun sets on this day.'* The acute sense of loss he felt at the thought shocked him. He had felt this extent of melancholy only a handful of times previously. *'Lord, Darcy, quit being so melodramatic. You can ride to Gracechurch Street in half an hour and meet her whenever you want,'* he tried to tell himself, but to no avail. It still felt as if his heart was being torn into two, exactly like it had felt the day she had rejected him. Why he should be feeling like this puzzled him. After all, yesterday's events had proven at least one thing – Elizabeth was *not* indifferent to him, and she *did not* dislike him. *'Then why?'* he asked himself. Feeling too restless to keep sitting, he got up and wandered to the French windows. As he stood staring at the garden unseeingly, his mind kept travelling to those beautiful moments from yesterday. He recollected how he had woken up with his head in her lap and how her beautiful eyes had clearly revealed all that she felt. They had given him hope for the future like nothing before. He closed his eyes, rested his forehead on the cool glass and relived those moments one more time. Suddenly, he straightened. *'Enough of this diffidence! Decorous behaviour or not, I have to tell her how I feel before she leaves here. And beg for... some understanding – a reaffirmation of the hope she offered me yesterday!'*

As he moved towards the door of his study, his gaze fell on another letter on his desk - the acceptance of his invitation to Geoffrey Baldwin. *'This is another thing that I have to tell her. But where would I find her at this time? Georgie is busy with her practice, and Millie is taking a nap. Elizabeth could be in the library, but...'* he looked out of the window and smiled. *'At this time of the day, she is more likely to be in mother's favourite parlour,'* he thought, and his legs automatically

moved thither. At this particular time, bathed in sunlight streaming from its windows, the red and gold parlour always gave one the feeling of being ensconced in a warm embrace. The room was a favourite with Georgiana too. *‘Perhaps if I find her there, it will be a good omen? Elizabeth is favouring the choice of other Darcy women as she would soon be one?’* Shaking his head at his ridiculous thoughts, he peered inside the sitting room and... smiled in delight. There she was, sitting on a couch near the window and staring out dreamily. Her legs were tucked comfortably under her, and a half-finished embroidery pattern was lying forgotten in her lap. Ridiculous fantasies aside, her presence here in the room gave him the encouragement he needed, and he went inside after gently shutting the door behind him.

“Elizabeth?” he called out softly.

She started at the sudden interruption to her reverie and turned her head towards him quickly. “Mr Darcy!” she exclaimed as her gaze involuntarily strayed to the door. If she was disconcerted to see it shut, it did not show on her countenance. “How are you feeling now?” she asked instead, gazing at the bruise on his face.

“I have felt better, Elizabeth, but things are definitely on the mend. Mostly it hurts when I accidentally touch the bruise,” he replied with a wry smile.

“Hmm... I hope you are taking the medicine Mr Stuart left for you.”

Darcy nodded, then said, “I have had a response from Baldwin. He will be here in an hour or so.”

“Oh, I really hope he sees the error of his ways and makes adequate arrangements for Millie.”

From what he knew of Baldwin’s character and his current situation, Darcy had his doubts about that. However, he chose to keep quiet. After all, he could always threaten Baldwin with revealing all the sordid details to his father, Lord Vincent. “I hope so too,” he said in response. “I ... I have written a letter to Mr Gardiner also. He... might come here in the evening.

“Oh...” was all Elizabeth said. Although she tried to keep her face

neutral, Darcy did not miss the shadow of sadness that passed over her face and disappeared swiftly.

“You know that whatever you choose to tell him, I will be there with you, supporting it, don’t you?” he asked quietly.

“I know that, Alex. As I informed you earlier, I would like to tell him all the pertinent facts, including the one about our stay in Bassingtonstoke.”

“Of course,” he said, then as he pondered over how Mr Gardiner might react to their story, a thought struck him that almost rendered him breathless with shock. Despite all his efforts to protect Elizabeth’s reputation, there was a strong possibility that her uncle might insist on their marriage, and he would gladly agree. In these circumstances, he would have said yes even if he had not wanted Elizabeth for himself. He also believed that Elizabeth knew this much of his honour. The very possibility that she might think he was offering for her under compulsion was so abhorrent that he would have blurted out the truth, had he not come there to expressly confess it all.

“Elizabeth?”

“Yes?”

Despite the encouragement her eyes had conveyed yesterday, Darcy found it safer to observe the familiar pattern on the carpet as he started to talk. “I... I had thought to wait until you were under your uncle’s roof to confess this. However, I now find I cannot let you leave here without telling you that my wishes and affections remain unchanged. No... no, I lie - my affections *have* changed.” He swallowed hard and forced himself to look into her eyes and continue, “I find that I love you more ardently than ever before.” He turned away from her when he saw her eyes widen in surprise. ‘*It seems that I once again misread the emotions in her eyes,*’ he thought and closed his eyes in disappointment. But the images from yesterday once again intruded before his eyes, and he found himself asking, “You told me that you no longer dislike me, Elizabeth. Now, I beg you to end my misery and tell me one more thing... is there any hope for me?”

He waited tensely for her response - his eyes still closed. For a

moment, there was silence in the room. Then with a whisper of a sound, he felt a light touch on his shoulder, and something came to rest just below his shoulder blade. His eyes sprang open in surprise, and as he turned his head, his gaze fell on the window glass. He could see Elizabeth standing right behind him. Her right palm was on his shoulder, and her forehead was resting very lightly on his back. Captivated, he was still staring at the image when she started to speak.

“Oh, Thank God!” she exclaimed, her voice raw with emotion. “I thought you would never ask me again... that I had completely alienated you with my vile accusations and angry words that day in Hunsford.” She had to swallow hard to continue. “Yesterday, when I finally realized what it would be to lose you, for one mad moment, I thought of begging you to give me one more chance - until better sense prevailed.” Her voice broke on the last word, and to his distress, Darcy saw tears slip out of her closed eyes. “Elizabeth, sweetheart, please don’t cry!” Darcy begged urgently as he turned to take her into his arms and hold her tight. She started to mumble something into his chest, and he had to bend his head to hear. “... I can tell you that I love you too, Alex, so much that I do not have the words to tell you how much. All I *can* tell you is that a life without you would be meaningless. ”

“Elizabeth, my heart,” he murmured. He cupped her face in his hands and raised it to his. Feeling too overwhelmed to say anything in response to her haunting words, he chose to show her the depth of his feelings. He began by kissing her forehead. Then his lips trailed to her beautiful eyes – eyes which had taught him to hope. Then his lips trailed further down over her cheeks till he could finally capture her lips with his own. It was not long before he realized that not only were her lips as sweet and as soft as he had imagined, but her ardency also matched his own. He had been right - they did make an excellent team, he thought exultantly. He broke the kiss only when he had to, then stood looking down at her flushed face, smiling foolishly down at her.

“Elizabeth?”

“Hmm?” she opened one eye to look at him.

He grinned. “Can I ask you something?”

When she nodded, he asked, “When did you find out that you love me?”

Elizabeth smiled and gently placed her hand on his cheek. “To be utterly honest, Alex, my feelings for you started undergoing a change the moment you cajoled little Millie out of that carriage, but I knew for sure that I loved you on the day of the picnic at the farmhouse.”

“What! Oh Lord!” he groaned and shook his head.

“What is the matter?”

“If only I had known! It was the very same day that I decided to wait till you reached your uncle’s home to beg you for another chance. I wanted to court you, to show you that I am not so very dislikeable...”

“Please don’t say that. You are not one bit dislikeable!” Elizabeth said fiercely.

Darcy stared at her in surprise, then smiled, “Elizabeth, I was talking about your previous impression. There is no need for a pretence. I am not so sensitive that I cannot take criticism in my stride.” He quirked his brow at her playfully and added, “I agree I am a little arrogant, but I have enough sense to know that I make mistakes and try to rectify them if I can.”

“I am not pretending! I meant what I said, and I do not like it if anyone tries to put you down... not even you,” Elizabeth replied, still fierce, but by the end of her sentence, her voice had started to crack.

With a frisson of shock, Darcy realized that she was in earnest. He pulled her to him in a tight embrace, “Oh, Elizabeth! Sweetheart, please do not put me on a pedestal in this manner. I am but a man with enough weaknesses!”

“I know that! No one in this world is perfect. I am not, and neither are you. But you are the kindest person I know. The best of men... and that’s all there is to it,” her voice came out muffled, but he could understand each word and truth or not they warmed him to the core.

He chuckled. “Very well, have it your way. I’ll remind you of this every time you are angry with me or fight with me.”

“Who said one does not fight with kind men?” She pulled away from him a little and looked at him with a raised brow.

“Hmm...” he did not say anything further, just gazed at her with a happy smile.

“Alex?”

“Hmm?”

“Why did you decide to wait till I reached Gracechurch Street to... to ask me again?”

“Well, you... I *believed* that *you* were dependent on me at the time... I did not want your response to be coloured by any obligation.” He shrugged.

Suddenly she chuckled, and he raised his brow, “What?”

“You and I are more alike than I thought!”

“How so?”

“One of the reasons I dropped the idea to confess my feelings to you was that I did not want you to accept me out of the kindness of your heart. As... as a sense of obligation just because a woman expressed her partiality towards you,” she replied in a muddled fashion.

Darcy raised his brow in astonishment. “Good God, Elizabeth! My parents taught me to be empathetic to others, but I am not a complete numbskull. I don’t want to sound like a coxcomb^[viii], but had I been in the habit of proposing to females out of kindness, just ... just because *they* showed a partiality towards me – then I would have proposed a minimum of fifty times in the last two or three years. Twenty times only to Miss Bingley!” He looked at her with a comical expression, and Elizabeth couldn’t help but chuckle at his words.

“What were the other reasons?” he asked after a while.

“Pardon?”

“What were the other reasons you decided against confessing your feelings yesterday?” he asked curiously.

“Apart from the fact that it would have been shameless and wanton?” she asked dryly.

“I could never consider you shameless or a wanton,” He said firmly. “Er... the other reason, Elizabeth?”

She sighed. “At the pool yesterday, when ... when you pulled away so abruptly, I concluded that you were trying to keep your distance,” she said with a blush. “I could not then make myself embarrass you by forcing my feelings on you.”

He groaned. “Oh, Lord! I was only trying to be the gentleman that I promised you I was, Elizabeth. Otherwise, it required every bit of my self-control to keep my distance as you so delicately put it.” He looked at her wryly. Elizabeth blushed and hid her face in his chest.

“I do hope that now you have realized that keeping my distance from you is the last thing on my mind,” he murmured in her ear. When she stayed silent, her face still hidden, he prompted, “Elizabeth?”

At first, she only nodded in response, then she pulled away from him slightly, and Darcy took a sharp breath at the alluring, impish smile on her face. “I would not mind a confirmation, though,” she said huskily.

“Minx!” he muttered, then bent down to kiss her fiercely. He stopped only when he felt himself in danger of losing his famed self-control. As he stood looking down at her lovely face, her lips curved in a tremulous smile that she seemed unable to stop, he felt happiness fizz through his veins. It humbled him that this kind, beautiful woman now returned his love so totally. He was also grateful that she felt comfortable enough to be so open and honest with him. Suddenly it occurred to him that *he* had not been completely honest with her - at least in one matter. And although the point was now moot, he wanted her to know.

“Elizabeth?”

“Hmm?”

“There is something I have to tell you.”

“What?”

“Ah... on the first night we spent in Mrs Webster’s home you... you came down with a high fever and were insensible for a time. Although I gave you the powder Mrs Webster had supplied just for that purpose, your fever did not reduce.” Darcy paused to take a deep breath, “You ... you kept shivering uncontrollably, even after I had wrapped my blanket around you. Unfortunately, there were no other bed linen in the room. So...” he came to a halt feeling uncomfortable.

“So?” she asked interestedly.

“Ahem... so I could think only one way of keeping you warm. I lay down next to you that night...” When he found her looking quizzically at him, he hurried to add earnestly, “But, that is all that happened that night, Elizabeth, I promise.”

“I know, Alex, you did not have to say it,” she said with a soft smile.

He looked at her searchingly for a moment, then hauled her into his arm with a groan. “Please do not make such a paragon out of me, Elizabeth. There was one moment in that night when...” He broke off.

“When?” she asked curiously.

“When you came in my arms seeking warmth, and I wanted you so badly...” His hold tightened on her reflexively.

As Elizabeth stood in the circle of his arms listening to his rapid heartbeats, she felt a thrill of pleasurable anticipation pass through her at his words. She found, however, that she could not really disclose her feelings to him. *‘This time, he will definitely think that I am a wanton!’* she thought ruefully. To be fair to herself, she also realized that she felt pleased with his disclosure *now*. She shuddered to think what would have happened to poor Alex had she woken up in the middle of *that* particular night!

To dispel the awkwardness that seemed to be growing between them at her continued silence, she leaned back and gently touched his cheek. “But you already told me that nothing untoward happened that night. You did what you had to for my wellbeing, and I am grateful to you. Also, I am thankful that...” she paused.

“That?”

“That I did not wake up that night, otherwise...” she paused again teasingly.

“Otherwise?” Darcy asked impatiently, and he was surprised to see her eyes suddenly gleaming with amusement.

She grinned. “Otherwise, I do not believe you would look as pretty with *two* bruises on your head at the same time!” she replied very deliberately.

For one moment, Darcy stared in surprise at her impertinent words. Then he threw back his head and laughed uproariously. “Minx!” he grinned and then hugged her to him.

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A while later, they were still in the parlour, sitting in chairs placed decorously apart. In a belated display of propriety, Darcy had opened the door to the room also.

“I am so happy right now, Alex. I only wish little Millie could be too,” Elizabeth said a little wistfully.

“Somehow, I have a feeling that everything will turn out well for our darling girl,” Darcy replied quietly.

“Alex?”

“Yes?”

“If you do not mind, I would like to hear what Mr Baldwin has to say... it would give me an idea of what sort of a person he is.”

“I would also like your impressions before we make the final decision about the poppet. But to be honest with you, Baldwin is not the kind of person I would like you to meet in the best of times and definitely not in these circumstances,” Darcy replied soberly.

“Oh, of course!” Although Elizabeth was disappointed, she could see the sense in his words.

Suddenly, he grinned. “However, just a few days ago, an intrepid young lady told me that she could hear what goes on in my study from the library. Now what can I do if something like that happens all

over again?" he asked, quirking his brow at her.

"Oh? Oh! Thank you, Alex," Elizabeth jumped up and, after swiftly throwing a glance at the empty doorway, bent to kiss Darcy on his cheek. "I will be in the library." As she made to go out of the parlour, Darcy called her back, "Elizabeth!"

She turned to him and was surprised to see his flushed countenance.

"I... er.. your hair... it needs a bit of tidying..." he said and gestured vaguely with his hand.

Puzzled, Elizabeth moved towards a small gilt mirror mounted on one of the walls. She blushed a fiery red when she saw how her hair was falling out of her coiffure. She hurriedly straightened her hair, and not a moment too soon. She had taken only a few steps away from the mirror when Higgins came to the parlour door and announced the arrival of Mr Geoffrey Baldwin, who was waiting in the anteroom.

Darcy nodded. "Very well, Higgins. Please announce his arrival in the study after five minutes."

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Chapter 18

By the time Higgins announced Baldwin, Darcy had exchanged a smile with Elizabeth in the library. He had ensured that the connecting door between the study and the library stood open a crack and tidied his desk of the few papers he had earlier left lying around in his hurry to go to her.

“Come in, Baldwin. Please take a seat,” Darcy said as he nodded to the other man. He studied the man carefully and could not find any resemblance between him and Millie. Geoffrey Baldwin was a man in whom there did not seem anything out of the ordinary. He was of medium height and slim built, with sandy hair and grey eyes. Had Millie’s eyes not been the exact replica of her grandmother’s, Darcy would have suddenly doubted the conclusion he and Georgie had arrived at yesterday. But then - Baldwin smiled and sat down. The smile was completely, totally Millie! The same lopsided, effervescent smile that made Millie so endearing to him. It also made Geoffrey Baldwin appear quite attractive all of a sudden. Although to Darcy, it was distasteful in the extreme. For an insane moment, he thought of getting up and personally wiping it off the rake’s face. Then good sense prevailed. He would try to be civil to the man, for little Millie’s sake.

“To tell you the truth, I was quite surprised to receive your message last evening, Darcy. Never before have you shown any inclination to mix with my set. I believe we do not match your exalted standards,” Geoffrey Baldwin said with a sneer. For Darcy, it was almost a relief to see the smile being replaced.

When he did not rise to the bait, Baldwin asked impatiently, “So what is this about? The land deal your man is negotiating with my father?” Despite the pretence of carelessness, Darcy could hear the anxiety in

the other man's voice.

"No, it is about Emily Dawson," Darcy replied and observed Baldwin carefully. He *thought* that the other man froze for a second at the mention of Millie's mother. Then the next moment, Baldwin's eyes flickered away guiltily, and Darcy was sure that he at least remembered the lady he had ruined. However, the other man tried his best to appear nonchalant. "Emily Dawson? Who is she? Some opera dancer in whom you are interested? I heard somewhere that you are not in the petticoat line^[viii]. However, I suppose it is not smart practice to believe everything one hears," he said with another insulting smile.

"Emily Dawson is dead." This time there was no mistaking the reaction. Baldwin's hand tightened on the monocle he had been playing with, so much that for a moment, Darcy feared that the glass would break. But then the other man forced himself to relax a little.

'It seems that he was unaware of Emily's death,' Darcy thought, then looked at the other man when he asked Darcy, "Would you like to tell me why we are talking about a dead woman?" Baldwin seemed to have lost most of his insolence.

"Because, when Emily Dawson died last year, she left behind her mother and her young daughter, Millie. Unfortunately, a few days ago, Emily's mother also perished in an accident. Now there is only three-year-old Millie, with nowhere to go."

"It is all very sad, I am sure, but I do not understand how you are involved in this? And... and why in heaven's name you are telling this story to *me*? I... I do not run any orphanages, do I?"

Darcy's mouth twisted in disgust, but he said evenly enough, "I am involved in all this only as a bystander - I came upon the carriage accident in which Emily's mother died most unfortunately."

"Oh! But..." Baldwin had started to protest when Darcy interrupted him savagely, too heartsick to beat around the bush anymore. "And when I tell *you* the story, I tell it to Millie's father, wanting him to come forward and take up the responsibility for his young daughter."

"What! Are you mad, Darcy? I do not know any Emily Dawson! What

is this nonsense? Is this the source of your riches? Blackmailing unsuspecting men,” Baldwin tried to bluster his way out of a tricky situation but, it was clear that he was scared and on the defensive.

Darcy got up from his seat and came to sit on the table in front of Baldwin’s chair. The man leaned back in his chair hurriedly, and his adam’s apple bobbed as he tried to swallow. Darcy had never been the one to try physical intimidation, even on adversaries. However, it now pleased him to see the repellent cur cowering in his seat. He took out the broken locket from the pocket of his waistcoat and dangled it in front of Baldwin’s face. “And what do you have to say now?”

Baldwin’s eyes widened in shock. “I... I... Emily stole that locket when she was turned off from her post,” he stuttered.

“Ah, your memory seems to be making a sudden recovery,” Darcy said sardonically. “Perhaps if I take this locket to your father, you might remember the rest?” he added and got a sullen look in response. “I am going to stick to my story, and you can’t prove any different,” Baldwin retorted obstinately.

Darcy found that he could not bear to look at Baldwin anymore. He got up and went to stare out of the French Windows. He saw Georgie and Millie in the garden, and despite his anger, a faint smile came to his lips. *‘Ah, Georgie is trying to cheer Millie up. Good. After yesterday’s scare, the child needs all the help she can,’* he thought. Suddenly a thought struck him. Earlier, he had hoped not to bring Millie in front of Baldwin. But perhaps that was what was needed for the man to accept the truth. He quickly went to his table, took a blank sheet of paper and fashioned a paper boat out of it. Next, he stepped out of the French window and called out to the little girl. “Millie, sweetheart, would you come here for a moment?” When the child came up to him, he picked her up and stood in a manner to ensure that Baldwin could get a good look at Millie’s face. “Do you want a paper boat, poppet?” When the girl nodded, he handed the boat to her and put her down once again. “You can ask Georgie to help you float it.”

“Float... boat... boat... float,” the little girl chanted unexpectedly and then giggled. For a moment, Darcy stood watching Millie hurrying out

to Georgiana. It felt so good to hear her carefree laughter once again that he had to swallow hard to clear the sudden constriction in his throat. Slowly he turned back to his study and looked once again at Baldwin. The man sat staring after the little girl, his mouth opening and closing soundlessly.

“If I take Millie to your father along with this locket, who do you think your father would believe?” Baldwin paled but did not react in any other way. Having got a glimpse at Millie seemed to have affected him strongly. All of a sudden, he whispered, “She has Emily’s hair... Emily was so very beautiful. She had midnight blue eyes and hair that felt like spun gold. And she had the sweetest temper. I met her when I was sent down from the university for cutting up a lark that the proctor found very offensive. Everyone at home treated me like dirt... except her.”

So, you decided to repay her by treating *her* like dirt?” Darcy interrupted him coldly. Baldwin flushed, but despite the biting sarcasm, he continued to unburden himself.

I fell in love with her but couldn’t marry her because my father fixed my marriage with the daughter of a cit^[ix] who was willing to pay enough ready to make our estate in Scotland solvent again.

“But it is not, is it?”

“For that to happen, we *need* that strip of your land, damn you!”

Darcy smiled grimly, “So why exactly did you fool Emily when you knew you could not marry her?”

“When I fell in love with her, I was not betrothed... It was only later that father told me... I... I couldn’t do anything.”

For a moment, Darcy contemplated the pleasure he might feel on squashing Baldwin’s face on his desk. With difficulty, he pulled himself together and enquired politely, “Not even keep the fall of your trousers buttoned up?”

Baldwin flushed uncomfortably but opened his mouth to argue further. However, by that time, Darcy had enough of the vile man’s presence, and he knew he could never leave Millie to the care of this

pathetic excuse of a man. "Shut up, just shut up, Baldwin. I had thought you might have some humanity left in you, that you would take a look at that precious child and might feel like owning up to your responsibility for her. But it was very foolish of me." Darcy paused to give Baldwin a satirical look. "How would a man own up the responsibility for another human being when he cannot even own up to his mistakes? I have no choice now but to approach Lord Vincent to do right by his own flesh and blood," he added with finality.

"From what he has done with two of my elder brother's baseborn daughters, this child will also be put in a convent atoning for the sins of her parents," Baldwin said bitterly.

Darcy's heart sank, *'So, I was right in my estimation about the joyless, puritanical Lord Vincent. I can't leave Millie with either of these men!'* he thought defeatedly. He came out of his reverie to hear Baldwin say, "Look, you don't have to involve my father. Right now, I don't have any ready cash. My own bills are sent to my wife's father once my wife has vetted them," Baldwin almost ground his teeth as he disclosed the last bit of information. And for a moment, Darcy feared that the man might suffer an apoplexy in his agitation.

"But... you can keep this locket and... here, take this ring also. I will see if I can lay my hand on some other jewellery. With these, you can comfortably make arrangements for the girl in an orphanage. It would definitely be better than a workhouse ..." Baldwin came to an abrupt halt when he observed Darcy's expression.

"But Millie is not an orphan, is she?" Darcy asked in a dangerous tone, and Baldwin swallowed hard. "And she will never be while I am alive!" Darcy promised fiercely. Baldwin's cruel words had suddenly made the future course of his actions very clear. "She will be my ward and will be raised as a Darcy in all but the name. And I do not want even your shadow to fall on her. So, just get up and leave, now! And if you know what is good for you, you will forget that we ever had this conversation." Darcy's voice was as cold as icicles, and Baldwin shivered involuntarily. Feeling not a little relieved and very

bewildered at the way things had unfolded, he got up hurriedly to leave.

“And Baldwin?”

“Y.. yes?”

“Before you go, I would like to tell you something I have been wanting to ever since I came to know about Millie’s parentage. You know that you are the lowest of the vermin, don’t you? While you might like to pretend that you were the helpless pawn in your father’s stratagems, but the truth is that only you are responsible for your actions. Only you are responsible for the ruination and death of a young girl, whose only faults were her kindness and naivety and her dreams to better her lot in life.” A terrified Baldwin stared open-mouthed at Darcy pronouncing judgement like some avenging angel. Unfortunately for him, Darcy had not yet finished.

“I do not know how many more lives you have ruined, and it pains me to know that I am unable to bring justice to Emily. But then... it comforts me to see you tied like a dog on a leash, controlled by your wife and her father. At least you are paying for your sins in whatever small way. You would be further happy to know that I will not be selling that piece of land to your father.” Darcy smiled frigidly when Baldwin gasped.

“But...”

“I would have loved to deny your father’s request outrightly, but then I hit on a better solution. I will lease the land to him. Your profits will grow for sure, but so will your fear every day - of the cancellation of the lease. It would definitely be very satisfying to see you always looking behind your back!” Darcy concluded with a wicked smile. Frankly, he was quite amazed to discover his Machiavellian propensities!

“Damn you, Darcy!”

“Uh uh... damn you, Baldwin. Damn you to hell! Now go away. Try to be a better human being, and I might just forget that you are a worm just waiting to be squished.” Baldwin had already jerked open the

study door when Darcy delivered his parting advice, “And remember, not a whisper about this anywhere in the ton. If I hear even a single rumour, you know what happens to the lease.” Baldwin left without a backward glance, but the tremors in his hands as he shut the door told Darcy that he would behave in future.

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Feeling restless, Darcy closed his eyes with a deep sigh. The throbbing in his temple had worsened after the interview with Baldwin. He had started to rub his neck in order to relieve the knots of tension when the interconnecting door to the library opened, and Elizabeth came hurrying in. Darcy had just opened his eyes at the sound of her rushed footsteps when he found himself engulfed in a warm embrace. Elizabeth buried her head in his chest and muttered fervently, “Oh, thank you, Alex.”

Darcy smiled and held her close, “I was worried that you might be upset. After all, I took such an important decision of our lives without even consulting you. But I should have known... you *are happy*, aren’t you?” She hummed in response and, Darcy bent his face to rest it on her hair with a smile. He closed his eyes once again and felt all the negativity that Baldwin had left in his wake, drain out of him.

“Elizabeth?”

“Hmm?”

“How soon will you marry me?”

She leaned back and smiled impishly, “Is this evening too early?” Darcy let out a surprised crack of laughter at that. “I am sorry, my darling but, I do not have a special license. Otherwise, I would have married you out of hand and presented your uncle with a fait accompli, when he visits Darcy house this evening,” he replied and tightened his arms around her.

After a while, he added, “More seriously, Elizabeth, we should marry soon. It will help to present the appearance of a respectably married man when I apply for Millie’s guardianship. I will go and get the

special license in a day or two if you are agreeable?”

“I do not think you need *anyone* to add to your respectability, but I am perfectly willing to do whatever you feel will help secure Millie’s future with us.” Elizabeth smiled and added, “I truly believe we will be very happy, Alex – You, me, Millie and Georgiana.”

Looking down at her smiling countenance, Darcy wanted very much to kiss her. Then he saw the open French windows, and with a sigh, compromised by raising her hands to his lips.

“You kiss Beth better, Dawcy? She fall down?”

Darcy turned his head towards the voice and saw a curious Millie standing at the entrance of the French Windows together with a grinning Georgiana.

“Not really, poppet. No one can kiss Beth better as she is already perfect! I was kissing her to thank her for agreeing to marry me.” As Georgiana squealed in delight, Darcy grinned and hugged Elizabeth to him. Then he opened his other arm and called his sister, “Come, Georgie, be the first to wish us happy and bring the poppet with you. Elizabeth has already declared we all are going to be one happy family.”

Georgiana, who had already started rushing forward, stopped abruptly at that. She looked down at Millie, then raised her brow enquiringly at her brother. When he nodded, she hurried forward with a delighted smile.

As Darcy’s arm drew her and Millie close to him, Georgiana kissed Elizabeth on her cheek and hugged her brother. “Oh, Fitzwilliam, I am so happy!”

“So am I, sweetling, so am I!” Darcy retorted. As he stood with his arms around the most precious people in his life, he felt his heart swell with gratitude to the Almighty. He had made several mistakes in the past year, some inadvertent and some deliberate, and they could have easily led to a lifetime of regrets. However, the Almighty had been benevolent enough to offer him an opportunity to rectify his mistakes and snatch a second chance at happiness. He recalled his

feelings on the day he had come upon Elizabeth and Millie after the accident. He had felt that the chance encounter had somehow been destined. *'How very right I was,'* he thought, his heart overflowing with happiness.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door, and Higgins came inside the study. He abruptly halted when he saw his master with his arms full. For a moment, he stood there blinking in surprise. Then Darcy saw something he had not seen ever in the last fifteen years Mr and Mrs Higgins had been in the Darcy's employ – a too wide and happy grin on the face of his faithful butler.

"Ahem... am I to wish you happy, sir?" he asked delicately.

Darcy grinned back, "As you can see, Higgins. Miss Bennet and I are to be married."

"Then please accept my felicitations, sir, Miss Bennet. I am sure you both will be very happy."

Elizabeth and Darcy both thanked the butler. Higgins then revealed the reason for his coming, "Colonel Fitzwilliam and Miss de Bourgh have come to call on you, sir. I have shown them to the drawing-room."

"Richard and Anne!" Darcy exclaimed in surprise, "Very well, Higgins, we will be there in a few moments."

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"Richard? Anne? What in God's name has happened? How come you both are here and without any prior intimation? Is everything well?" Darcy asked worriedly as he entered the drawing-room, followed closely by Georgiana and Elizabeth.

Instead of answering, Colonel Fitzwilliam and Miss de Bourgh took a long moment to observe the three entrants to the drawing-room, especially Elizabeth. On finding her appearing remarkably well, they exchanged a relieved glance. The colonel then turned to address Darcy. "Prior intimation! I never thought a day would come when I would be asked for prior intimations before I could set foot in my

cousin's home.” He assumed a doleful expression and sighed theatrically.

Darcy visibly relaxed at the sign of Richard's playacting. “If you can indulge in this tomfoolery, then I can safely assume that nothing dire has happened. Although I have to confess that I am still quite eager to find out what has brought you and Anne here to London together?” Darcy said and was surprised to see Richard appear a little disconcerted, while Anne gave his flustered cousin a mischievous smile.

“Umm... we came hurrying here because of not one but two reasons. The first one is that this morning we came to know from Mrs Collins that Miss Bennet's carriage had suffered an accident while travelling to London. Since it was because of our *dear aunt* that Miss Bennet was in that carriage at all, we were justifiably upset. Especially Anne, and she wanted to come and see for herself that Miss Bennet had not suffered any real harm. I can't tell you how relieved we are to find her looking so well.”

“And the other reason?” Darcy asked, secretly feeling quite disappointed with Mrs Collins for being such a big gossip. From what Elizabeth had told him about her, he had expected better from her.

“Before I tell you that, I would like to ask you all to not blame Mrs Collins for letting us into the secret. When Anne asked her pointed questions about the incident, the poor lady could do nothing else but tell us the truth.”

“But... how did *you* know anything at all about it?” Darcy asked Anne in surprise.

Before Anne could open her mouth, Richard replied in her stead, “It was really a coincidence. While journeying back from Dover yesterday, I decided to spend my night at Rosings. Who do you think I met as I was passing by the turning to the Hunsford Parsonage?”

Richard was quite unprepared for the reaction of his cousin and Miss Bennet at the simple question. While Darcy groaned, the lady chuckled. “You met Stephen, a footman employed at Darcy House,” Darcy replied wryly.

“Exactly. While the man was not very keen to reveal much of anything, I could get him to disclose that he was acting the messenger between Mrs Collins and Miss Bennet, who somehow happened to be staying at Darcy House. Later, when I told this to Anne, she was extraordinarily interested in this piece of information. She also made me aware of the events that had transpired at Rosings once you and I left last week. Well, you cannot really blame us if we went to Mrs Collins this morning to find out the details,” Richard said with a shrug.

“Can’t I, just?” Darcy asked sardonically, then changed the topic. “But what is this second reason for which you both came rushing to London?” His curiosity increased when Richard became flustered again. “Well?” he prompted.

Richard sighed. “We came here to tell *you* and the parents that we... that is Anne and I... have decided to get leg-shackled,” he said a little flippantly.

Darcy was completely unprepared for such an answer, and his shock was quite visible on his face. “Did Aunt Catherine try her tricks on you too?” he asked in agitation.

“What! Of course not! I offered for Anne because I have been wanting to do so for a very long time.” Richard appeared quite offended at Darcy’s suggestion. “Anyhow, I am not such a catch that our aunt would try with me what she did with you. The fact is that she does not even know that I have proposed, and Anne has accepted!” Richard finished dryly.

There were collective gasps from the audience, just as Darcy exclaimed, “You are not serious, Richard!”

“Well, I am! When I came to know what the old tartar had done to Miss Bennet, I remonstrated with her, and she very callously told me to mind my own business!”

“Richard!” Anne admonished.

“Oh... very well! *Aunt Catherine* told me to mind my own business. It irritated me enough to agree to abscond with Anne without telling our

dear aunt. Let *her* also know, even if only for a day, how it feels to have a beloved daughter under some kind of threat,” Richard said, angrily. “You can also imagine how pleased mother would be to send an express to the old... er... Aunt Catherine, announcing my engagement to Anne,” he concluded with a wicked grin. The hostility between the Earl’s wife and his only surviving sister was the worst kept secret in their family.

Darcy grinned back but refrained from commenting. Instead, he asked something that was puzzling him ever since Richard made his surprising announcement. “Well, then I wish you both very happy, but please do deign to satisfy my curiosity a little. *Why* exactly you have been waiting to propose to our Anne if you had been wanting to do so for *such a long time*?”

Richard coloured and did not immediately answer. “Ah... well...” he began hesitantly.

Anne interrupted him with a mischievous smile, “Let me answer that for you very succinctly! Well, cousin, Richard did not want to poach on your preserves, especially as they came attached with an estate! He did not want to cheat you of any riches, so to say. After all, mother never once forgot to remind us of how you and I were meant for each other, did she?”

“Oh, Lord!” Darcy groaned. “I never knew you were such a numbskull, Richard! Did you ever see me profess an interest for Anne in that manner, ever?”

“But you never said anything otherwise, even to Aunt Catherine! You just chose to remain silent. In certain things you are so taciturn that I never could figure out whether you were genuinely not interested in marrying Anne, or you were baulking as our aunt was putting unnatural pressure on you,” Richard said ruefully.

“Oh, Lord!” Darcy said again and shook his head. “But you and I already discussed that we would not suit. Why did *you* not say anything to Richard?” Darcy asked Anne in puzzlement.

“And what was I supposed to say? Hey, Richard, listen, Darcy and I have decided we do not suit each other. Now, could you please hurry

up and propose to me?” Anne asked dryly, then added almost to herself, “How could I? When this obstinate man never gave me even an inkling of his feelings,” she finished on a deep sigh.

“Oh, God, what a mess! But I am so glad you both have finally resolved the matter between you! Congratulations, my dears. I know you both will be very happy,” Darcy said with a pleased smile as he went to enfold both his cousins in a hug and slapped the colonel on his back for good measure.

When he stepped back, Georgiana rushed in to hug her cousins and offer her felicitations. “By the by, how did this miracle happen?” Darcy asked Richard curiously.

“Oh, as soon as Anne told me that you had proposed to... ouch!” Richard turned to Anne in surprise. “Oh...” he said with a flushed face.

Darcy grinned. “You don’t have to walk on eggshells here, Anne, Richard. You both will be glad to know that Elizabeth has finally agreed to marry me!”

“What!” Both his cousins exclaimed in unison.

“Oh, I am so glad,” Anne said with a smile and caught Elizabeth, who had come forward to offer her own felicitations to her, in a hug while Richard did the same to Darcy.

“Thank you so much, Miss de Bourgh. I realized the truth of your comment about first appearances very soon after the accident happened, and Alex came to our rescue,” Elizabeth told Anne with all sincerity. “I am glad,” Anne said again and smiled.

Georgiana and both her cousins had noticed the very uncommon nickname that Elizabeth had used for Darcy. Uniformly surprised, all of them had surreptitiously glanced at Darcy to gauge his reaction. They got their answer in the adoring look he was giving his betrothed, quite oblivious to the presence of others. It was only when the colonel cleared his throat quite noisily that Darcy came back to his surroundings and looked away with a flush.

Georgiana had been feeling puzzled ever since Richard had mentioned

some ill-treatment their aunt had meted out to Elizabeth. Now it also appeared that her brother had proposed to Elizabeth once before and had been rejected, most astonishingly! If she had understood her brother's cryptic words correctly.

"Brother?"

"Yes, Georgie?"

"What did... Aunt Catherine say to Elizabeth?" she asked with an apologetic glance at Anne, who smiled back understandingly. Darcy glanced at Elizabeth, sought and received her consent silently. He then told Georgiana very briefly about how events had unfolded once he and Richard had left Rosings.

"I did not tell you some things earlier as I did not want to force Elizabeth's hand in any way. However, since then, I have realized my mistakes and Elizabeth has very generously decided to give me a second chance," he concluded with a happy smile.

"Since then, we *both* have realized *our* mistakes, and the Almighty has been very kind to offer *us* a second chance at happiness," Elizabeth said very firmly. Just then, Higgins came to the door of the drawing-room. "Sir, Mr Gardiner has called as you had intimated. He seems to be very agitated and..." Before poor Higgins could even finish his sentence, a man pushed him aside and entered the room.

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## Chapter 19

“Mr Gardiner?” Darcy moved forward quickly with an outstretched hand and was disconcerted when the other man did not accept it.

Instead, Mr Gardiner said, “Yes, I am Gardiner, and you must be Mr Darcy. You, sir, can begin by telling me what you mean by sending me such a cryptic and alarming message? You write that it is about my niece Elizabeth and then do not mention anything further.” He gave Darcy an annoyed look and asked, “So what is it that you want to tell about my niece? Has something happened to her?” he asked worriedly. Then having realized, belatedly, that there were others in the room, he looked around.

“Er... no...” Darcy began but was interrupted, as with an exclamation of “Lizzy! What are you doing here, girl?” Mr Gardiner rushed towards his niece.

“I...” Elizabeth began, but she too was interrupted. Having seen the wound to her head, Mr Gardiner gestured towards it. “What happened to you, Lizzy?” he asked anxiously. Although the wound had healed enough for the bandage to be removed, a salve was still needed for protection.

“I... the carriage I was travelling in, met with an accident. I sustained a small injury when I fell out of the carriage.” Elizabeth found it easier to answer this question but was immediately flummoxed by the next one from Mr Gardiner. “Where were you going, Lizzy?” he asked in puzzlement.

“Umm... I was coming to London - with a Mrs Dawson and her granddaughter,” Elizabeth replied evasively.

“But ... you were not supposed to journey for another se’nnight! I was to send my carriage to pick you up. Why did you start so early?” Mr

Gardiner persisted.

"I... umm..." Elizabeth floundered and looked helplessly at Darcy. Even as Darcy debated on how to tell the unpleasant story in the least offensive manner, Miss de Bourgh jumped in the fray to help her cousin out.

"Mr Gardiner?" she called out.

"Yes, ma'am?" Mr Gardiner asked warily.

"I am Anne de Bourgh. I am the daughter of Lady Catherine, who..."

"I am aware who is Lady Catherine de Bourgh, ma'am."

Anne cleared her throat, "Yes... well, the fact of the matter is that my mother is... somewhat autocratic and, more often than not, all of us at Rosings end up doing what she decrees. Except for my cousin Darcy here." Anne quirked a smile at Darcy and then continued, "We have found that it is usually the best way to maintain peace at Rosings. Quite cowardly, I suppose, but that is how things are..." Poor Anne babbled a little in her anxiety.

"I am sorry, but I do not understand what your mother's temperament has to do with Lizzy advancing her journey to London?" Mr Gardiner asked impatiently, trying his best to hold on to his temper in front of a lady.

"Unfortunately, everything!" Anne said unhappily and then added, "Please, sir, I request you to let me tell this without interruption. As it is, this is quite challenging for me."

Mr Gardiner sighed, forcing himself to be patient. "Very well, Miss de Bourgh, please continue."

Anne nodded her thanks. "For a very long time, my mother has made herself believe, quite incorrectly, that Darcy and I are betrothed. So, when she came to realize that Darcy admires Miss Bennet... she..."

"What claptrap is this! Even I am aware that Mr Darcy declared my niece to be not handsome enough to tempt him *even for a dance*! I have to say, ma'am, that being autocratic is not the only one of your mother's failings!" Mr Gardiner exclaimed. The reaction from his audience to his statement was quite varied.

“Oh, God!” Darcy groaned in mortification. Elizabeth closed her eyes in regret - for her intemperate words regarding Mr Darcy to her aunt. Georgiana gaped at her brother in astonishment. Anne blinked in surprise, and Colonel Fitzwilliam burst out laughing, “Oh, Darcy, you twit!” he exclaimed.

“Oh, shut up, Richard!” Both Anne and Darcy said almost simultaneously. Then Anne took up her narrative once again, “Actually, my mother was *not* incorrect in that particular assumption, Mr Gardiner. Last week, when my cousins suddenly left Rosings without intimation, she assumed, incorrectly, that Elizabeth had used her influence on my cousin to hurry their departure. Very injudiciously, she then accused Elizabeth of trying to trap my cousin into marriage, and...”

“Elizabeth trying to trap Mr Darcy into marriage! Surely you jest Miss de Bourgh. My niece can hardly bear the sight of Mr Darcy! Why in heaven’s name would she try to trap him? I do not know why you are telling this tarradiddle... but..”

Before he could finish, with a loud, “Oh my God!” Colonel Fitzwilliam went into whoops of laughter, and Mr Gardiner stared at him in affront. Darcy and Elizabeth both sat down on a couch, mortified beyond words.

Praying for patience, Anne gritted her teeth and continued, “Mr Gardiner, sir, I do wish that for once you would let me continue without interruptions.” Slightly surprised by her imperious tone, Mr Gardiner turned to her in silence. Taking advantage of that, she rushed on with the explanation. “While you are right about your niece’s feelings *at the time*...

“At the time? Whatever do you mean *at the time*? I believe we *are* talking of events of only the *last* week, aren’t we?”

Even as Colonel Fitzwilliam let out another chuckle, Anne gritted her teeth. “Yes, sir, indeed. And last week, your niece had received and rejected a proposal of marriage from my cousin at Rosings.” As Mr Gardiner’s mouth dropped open at the disclosure, she hurriedly added, “Unfortunately, at my mother’s intemperate accusations, Elizabeth lost

her... er... patience and... ah... a little rashly disclosed this information to all of us. That predictably infuriated my mother, and she ordered Mr Collins to... send Elizabeth back to London immediately. I...”

Mr Gardiner, who had fallen silent at the shocking disclosures, became livid all over again at this latest bit of information. “What! Your mother ordered my niece - a gentleman’s daughter, to be unceremoniously thrown out of her own cousin’s home because she believed some farfetched nonsense! Is that why my poor niece started her journey to London so early? Did your mother also try to ensure that my niece does not come out of this alive? The more I hear your explanations, Miss de Bourgh, the more I think your mother is not quite right in her head. And you all, who let her perpetrate this calumny without lifting a finger, are despicable. Come, Lizzy, we will not stay in this vile place for one more moment! Let us go back to Gracechurch Street immediately.”

A stunned silence followed Mr Gardiner’s angry tirade. None of the four cousins knew how to pacify the enraged man in front of them and stared mutely at him in shock. Finally, it was Elizabeth who protested vehemently. “No... no, Uncle Edward! You have jumped to an erroneous conclusion and are being as unfair to Miss de Bourgh and Mr Darcy as Lady Catherine was to me!”

“Lizzy! Whatever do you mean?” Mr Gardiner asked, very shocked by his niece’s outburst.

“While it is true, sir, that Lady Catherine issued an edict for me to immediately leave Hunsford parsonage which, by the by my *dear cousin* was very willing to follow...”

“That toad!” Mr Gardiner nearly growled.

Elizabeth smiled faintly and continued, “But then it is equally true that you are seeing me alive and well today only because Miss de Bourgh and Mr Darcy did *lift their fingers - most promptly*, to help me when I needed it most! Miss de Bourgh ensured that I could stay in Hunsford until my journey to London was safely arranged, with a respectable woman to chaperon me...”

“Oh!” Mr Gardiner said, losing some of his belligerence at the intelligence.

“And Mr Darcy came to our rescue when our carriage met with an accident.” As Mr Gardiner stood there looking quite confused, Elizabeth went to her uncle and gently caught hold of his hand and brought him to a sofa. “Please sit here, Uncle Edward, and I promise, I will tell you whatever you want to know.” Once they were both seated, Elizabeth quickly summarized how the events had unfolded in the last se’nnight. While her narrative included all the material facts, it obviously did not include all the emotional upheaval she had undergone, nor that one tiny fact about the pretence she and Mr Darcy had undertaken in Bassingtonstoke!

Mr Gardiner sat hugging Elizabeth silently for a long while after she had completed her tale. Then he got up and went to Miss de Bourgh.

“I hope you will forgive me for my intemperate words, Miss de Bourgh, and allow me to thank you for the great service you did for my niece,” he said simply.

An embarrassed Anne demurred hurriedly. “There is no need to apologise, Mr Gardiner. I can easily understand your anguish, and I did nothing but try and undo some of the damage that my mother had inflicted. Please think no more on this.”

Mr Gardiner smiled faintly. “You are very kind, ma’am,” he said and bowed to her. He then approached Darcy and conveyed the very same thoughts with a very similar response. For a moment, he stood irresolute, then with a sigh, he called Elizabeth to him. When she stood near him, he addressed Darcy again. “Mr Darcy, from the story Lizzy tells me, it appears that *out of necessity*, you compromised her quite a few times in the last few days. However, she also told me how careful you were to protect her reputation. As her uncle, I have a duty to ensure that her reputation remains untarnished. Ideally, I would have insisted that you marry her after the events that have transpired. But... but I find I am not really keen to do that.”

Quite oblivious to the dismayed silence that had suddenly descended in the drawing-room, Mr Gardiner paused to take a deep breath and

then continued, "So, we will wait and watch for the next few weeks. And unless there is some danger to Lizzy's reputation, I would not like to repay your kindness by forcing you to tie yourself to someone who dislikes you. Especially when... ahem." He broke off at the expression on Mr Darcy's face.

There was a strange expectancy in the silence that followed. It was broken almost immediately by Elizabeth. She was already feeling heartsore and mortified at all their follies being revealed to everyone in the room. However, the hurt that had flashed on Mr Darcy's face at her uncle's inadvertently cruel words was the last straw.

"I *don't* dislike him! I love him! With all my heart. I don't dislike him... I don't..." her words petered out as she broke down and hid her face in her hands.

"Elizabeth, sweetheart, *don't*."

"Lizzy?" The two voices came out almost simultaneously as a perplexed Mr Gardiner enfolded his distressed niece in his arms. Confused and disconcerted at Lizzy's extraordinary behaviour, he glanced warily at Mr Darcy. He found that young man staring at his niece, totally oblivious to everyone else in the room. And if *his* expression was anything to go by, he was trying hard to prevent himself from dragging Lizzy into his arms from her uncle's! '*Well... well! This Lady Catherine may be a cruel, tiresome woman, but apparently, she is no one's fool!*' Mr Gardiner thought in amusement and looked around at others in the room. All of them wore pleased, knowing smiles on their face! '*I seem to be the last one to know!*' Mr Gardiner thought ruefully, feeling amused and embarrassed in equal measures at the farce he had enabled just now in his ignorance.

"Lizzy, my dear, I hope you will forgive your uncle for distressing you and Mr Darcy in this manner." He looked down at his niece and added wryly, "All I can put up in my defence is that you certainly seemed to have changed your tune since we last met in February!" Mr Gardiner grinned when he heard Elizabeth's very muffled groan of "Uncle Edward!"

"Well, Mr Darcy, I have changed my decision. Now, I absolutely insist



that you marry my niece without delay for having comprised her numerous time in the past se'nnight!" Mr Gardiner said, mock seriously.

Darcy dragged his gaze from Elizabeth and smiled at her uncle. However, before he could enlighten the other man regarding his intentions, there was a very unwelcome interruption from the doorway.

"Nonsense! Darcy *cannot* marry your niece! He is already betrothed to my daughter since they both were in their cradles!" an irate voice declared most emphatically.

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"Mother! What are you doing here?" Anne asked as Lady Catherine entered the drawing-room, followed by a decidedly unhappy-looking Mr Collins, who grew still more unhappy at Anne's glare.

"The same as you, Anne. I have come to save your betrothed from the clutches of this scheming jezebel! I am glad that you have finally seen some sense."

"What *are* you talking about, mother?" Anne asked in surprise.

"I am not betrothed to Anne, Aunt Catherine!"

Ignoring Darcy, Lady Catherine replied to her daughter, "When you and Richard had been gone for a long time, I discovered that our new carriage was missing along with you. I then went to the parsonage to see if Mrs Collins knew anything about your whereabouts.

But before the maid could announce me, I heard Mrs Collins lamenting to her sister. *'Eliza would be very disappointed in me that I could not keep her secret. Now, Colonel Fitzwilliam and Miss de Bourgh have gone to Darcy House to meet her!'*" Lady Catherine paused to glare at Elizabeth and then continued, "I immediately understood that you must have come here to save Darcy from *her* machinations, and I followed in order to help you. I brought *her cousin* Mr Collins along to transport her back to her home and ensure that she does not trouble Darcy further. But now that this man – her uncle, is here, he can take

her back!"

As soon as Lady Catherine introduced him into the conversation, Mr Gardiner thought to take advantage of the fact. "Ah...Madam... as an interested party in this discussion, I would like to know if there is any proof of this pre-existing betrothal between your daughter and Mr Darcy? Otherwise, I insist that he marry my niece without delay."

"Their betrothal is of a peculiar nature..." Lady Catherine began.

"There is NO betrothal!" Darcy repeated with gritted teeth.

Richard suddenly jumped into the conversation. "I do not like peculiar things. That is why *I* became betrothed to Anne yesterday in the most *unexceptional* manner possible. By now, father will have sent the announcement to the Times. Mother was planning to write to you about it, Aunt, but now that you are here it behoves me to let you know personally."

"What! Have you gone mad, Richard? Surely he jests, Anne?" Lady Catherine thumped her cane on the floor and glared at her daughter.

"No, mother, Richard and I are betrothed," Anne replied firmly.

"I forbid it!" Lady Catherine shouted.

"You cannot forbid it, mother, I am of an age and am free to marry wherever I choose."

Instead of answering her, Lady Catherine rounded on Darcy. "Look! How your lust for this scheming hussy has spoiled everything. If you want her so much, get her out of your system in some other way. After all, you are a man of the world. But how can you even think of polluting the Darcy bloodline in this manner?" Suddenly, the irate lady turned towards Elizabeth, and pointing her cane at her, she shouted threateningly, "Who is she and who are her relatives? She has no dowry, no connections, no breeding..."

For a moment, Darcy had been shocked into immobility by his aunt's extremely uncouth insinuations about Elizabeth. But when he saw her threateningly wield her cane, he snapped out of his stupor. "Lady Catherine!" he exclaimed. Then stepping between her and Elizabeth, he snatched his aunt's cane. As that stunned lady watched in disbelief,

he broke the cane into two and threw the pieces on the floor. It was the very first time Darcy had shown any disrespect to his aunt, and his actions left her speechless with shock. Unfortunately for her, her nephew had just begun.

“*You* dare to speak of good breeding! If using vulgar, uncouth language in front of your sixteen-year-old innocent niece is a sign of refined breeding, then I am glad Elizabeth doesn’t have it. If scheming to trap your nephew into marriage with your daughter is a sign of good breeding, then I am overjoyed that Elizabeth lacks it. If cruelly throwing out a young woman from her sanctuary, exposing her to danger, ruination or worse, is a sign of noble breeding, then I am delighted that it passed Elizabeth by!” As he paused to take a breath, a shocked silence reigned in the drawing-room.

“Now, madam, listen very carefully. I am going to marry Elizabeth, and *no one* can stop me. So, from now on, be very careful of what you say about her. I will not tolerate any disrespect for my wife in words or deeds. As it is, I will never be able to forgive that you callously forced this toad,” Darcy turned to glare at a cowering Collins, then continued, “To throw her out of his home. Never. Today, you were allowed in my home only because of the respect I have for *my mother*. Unless you publicly apologise to Elizabeth for besmirching her name and exposing her to danger, from this day onward, I am going to forget that you and I are related!”

As Darcy’s tirade continued, Lady Catherine started to appear a little shrunk in stature. She opened her mouth to remonstrate with her nephew for his shocking and totally unexpected disrespect, but no words came out of it. She then glanced at her daughter. Although Anne appeared a little uncomfortable, to Lady Catherine’s shock, she found even her daughter ranged against her.

“I have never been so insulted in my life, that too by my own flesh and blood! I wash my hands off you, you ungrateful boy! You will remember my advice when this scheming hussy is responsible for your ruin and ostracization, and then I will have the last laugh,” the lady said angrily, but her words lacked her usual conviction.

She started to walk out of the room when Richard called out to her, “Aunt Catherine so that you know, Anne will soon be finishing the formalities to take over as the mistress of Rosings. As the executor of the estate, today father has sent out some guards to Rosings. They won’t be troubling you in any manner unless you give them any reason to,” he said with a deadpan expression.

“What! Harry cannot do this to me. He will have me to answer!” Lady Catherine said and jerked her head towards Mr Collins. “Come, Collins,” she said. Mr Collins had taken only one step towards her when Richard asked very softly, “ Mr Collins, I think my betrothed reminded you once before, who employs you, didn’t she?”

Mr Collins gulped and hesitated. Lady Catherine’s eyes widened in shock, “You traitorous toad! You can forget about accompanying me now!” she snarled and moved on.

“But... my lady, how will I travel to Hunsford?” Mr Collins whined.

“Ask your new patron.” Lady Catherine left with that parting shot. As Darcy stood hearing the sound of her footsteps, resembling those of a tired, old woman, he felt a moment of regret. Then he remembered her vile words and callous actions and hardened his heart.

He came out of his reverie to hear Mr Collins pathetically asking Anne about his journey to Hunsford, and his mouth twisted in disgust.

“Mr Collins?”

“Yes, Miss de Bourgh?”

“When you were going to throw Miss Bennet out of your home that evening, how did you think she would travel to London?” Anne asked sweetly.

“I... I don’t know, madam,” Mr Collins stammered.

“Exactly, Mr Collins. I also do not know how you will travel back to your home, and frankly, neither do I care. But given that you are so fond of arranging impromptu journeys for others, I am sure you could arrange one for yourself. You may as well start now,” she said dryly.

After bowing low to her and others in the room, Mr Collins unhappily started to make his way out of the room. Richard then decided to

warn the repellent man they would need to tolerate because of his wife.

“Mr Collins?”

“Y... yes Colonel Fitzwilliam?”

“Given the extremely unchristian manner in which you behaved towards your cousin, we would have seriously considered applying to the archbishop for stripping you of the living. It is only because of your wife that we dropped the idea. But remember, from now I will be watching you like a hawk, one more reprehensible act like this one, Collins, and...”

“No... no... Colonel Fitzwilliam. I am a Christian man. I will not give you any reason for complaint in future,” Mr Collins almost fell over himself in order to reassure his new patrons.

Richard remembered the stupidly ingratiating manner Mr Collins used to employ with his Aunt Catherine and shuddered. “You may leave then,” he said shortly.

As Mr Collins went out, he left behind him an awkward silence. Mr Gardiner had watched the whole drama unfold incredulously. When Lady Catherine had thrown her obnoxious accusations, he had been very offended. However, the manner in which Mr Darcy had jumped in to defend Lizzy had made him realize that his niece was well-loved and respected. His lingering doubts about the somewhat unequal union had then melted away.

“Mr Darcy, I think Lizzy and I should also leave now. It has been a very long day, and when I rushed here, I did not even tell my wife why and where I was going. She and Jane will be getting worried by now,” Mr Gardiner said to Darcy.

“Of course, sir, I will ask Higgins to oversee the removal of Elizabeth’s luggage to your carriage,” Darcy said with a nod.

“Uncle Edward, I... I want to take Millie along with us,” Elizabeth said to her uncle.

Mr Gardiner smiled at her. “Of course, Lizzy.”

“Umm.. we have Sarah with us, who has been looking after Millie for

the past few days. If you do not mind, Mr Gardiner, please let her accompany Millie. The poppet has already seen a lot of upheaval in the last se'nnight." Mr Gardiner was again happy to oblige.

As Elizabeth left to see to her things, Darcy put in another request to her uncle. "I would like to accompany Elizabeth and Millie to Gracechurch Street, if I may?"

For a moment, Mr Gardiner appeared amused, but all he said in response was, "Please do, Mr Darcy."

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When Darcy followed Mr Gardiner into the drawing-room of his home, he found two people inside. Miss Bennet was sitting on a sofa beside a dark-haired, graceful woman, a few years older than him.

As he entered, the lady was addressing Mr Gardiner, "You were away for such a long time, Edward! We were beginning to get worried... Lizzy! Where did *you* come from, my girl? What has..." The lady broke off in surprise as she perceived Darcy standing behind Elizabeth, carrying little Millie in his arms.

"Oh, I am sorry..."

"I am sorry to have surprised you in this manner, Madeline. Let me introduce you to our guests. This is Mr Darcy of Pemberley, and this little lady is Millie." Mr Gardiner then turned to Darcy. "My wife, Madeline Gardiner and you have already met my niece, Jane."

"Welcome to our home, Mr Darcy and Millie. Please take a seat." Mrs Gardiner smiled, but the confusion and worry remained in her eyes. As she looked expectantly at her husband, he added, "Oh, I forgot to tell you, Mr Darcy and our Lizzy became betrothed today." The reaction to his words was as expected. For a moment, Mrs Gardiner and Jane Bennet stood with their mouths agape, then both exclaimed simultaneously, "Edward!" "L... Lizzy?"

Mr Gardiner said, "I know you both are confused and most certainly will have many questions, but first, let me assure you that everything is well. And... after the very unpleasant experience I had just now, I

would suggest Lizzy tells you what has been happening in her life over the past week, while I take Mr Darcy to my study. Umm.. would Millie be..”

“She can stay with me if it is agreeable?” Darcy asked quietly.

“Of course, then please come with me, Mr Darcy.” Mr Gardiner gestured with his hand.

“Call me Darcy or Fitzwilliam if you would prefer that.”

“Very well, and I am Gardiner. Come along then, Darcy.”

It was nearly an hour later when there was a knock at the door of Mr Gardiner’s study, and Mrs Gardiner came inside.

“Lizzy told us about the accident and how you came to her rescue, Mr Darcy. We all are very thankful to you...”

Darcy replied ruefully, “Elizabeth would not have been in this situation had it not been for my aunt’s unpardonable conduct. So, there is no cause for gratitude, madam. I am just grateful that I could be of help to her.”

“Well, you can’t be held responsible for your aunt’s conduct! And please also accept my best wishes for your and Lizzy’s happiness. Earlier, when Edward announced your betrothal we were too... er... surprised to offer our felicitations.”

Darcy nodded his thanks, but he noticed that even as Mrs Gardiner offered her best wishes, her eyes showed her reservation. ‘*It is understandable, I suppose.*’ Darcy came out of his reverie to hear Mrs Gardiner inviting him for dinner.

“I thank you for the invitation, Mrs Gardiner, but some other time, perhaps? Today has been a long and tiring day for all of us. I would like to take your leave now, but before that would it be possible to talk to both Elizabeth and Millie just for a little while,” he asked.

“Of course, you will find Elizabeth in the drawing-room.”

Darcy followed Mrs Gardiner. Millie was in his arms. When he reached the drawing, Miss Bennet also offered him her felicitations. After thanking her, Darcy requested Elizabeth to accompany him and

Millie to the garden in the Gardiners' home.

"So, how did it go?" Darcy asked Elizabeth a little anxiously, as they stepped out in the garden. He put Millie down near a flower bed, and she scampered away to examine it.

"As well as could be expected, I suppose," Elizabeth replied with a slight grimace. "They were suitably horrified at the events leading up to the accident and are truly thankful that you came upon us when you did. Only..."

"Only?" He prompted when she did not continue immediately.

"The only issue is Aunt Gardiner's worry that mayhap I... I am confusing gratitude with love, and I cannot really blame her for it. Earlier I had been absurdly intemperate in my dislike of you and airing it to all and sundry, including her," Elizabeth replied with a remorseful look.

For a moment, Darcy's heart twisted. *'Is Mrs Gardiner right in her worries?'* he wondered uneasily. Elizabeth answered his silent query soon enough. "She is understandably confused since I could not lay bare my heart to her as I did to you."

Feeling ashamed of his sudden insecurities and unable to talk about it, he gave her a quick hug and brushed her forehead with his lips. "Do not worry, Elizabeth, soon she will know the truth," he murmured comfortingly.

"Hmm..." Elizabeth nodded then said, "Mr Bingley had called at Gracechurch Street while Uncle Gardiner was with us in Darcy House,"

"And..."

We could not talk in too much detail, but it seems he did apologise very profusely. He also let Jane know that he was unaware of her presence here till recently." Suddenly, Elizabeth gave him a mischievous smile, and Darcy raised his brow enquiringly.

"Like the very good friend he is, Mr Bingley blamed only his sisters for the mischief. He mentioned you only in connection with how he came to be aware of Jane's presence in London."



“Oh, Bingley, you are too kind-hearted,” Darcy murmured with a rueful smile. “And how did Miss Bennet take the disclosures?” he asked after a while.

Elizabeth shrugged. “It is not easy to tell with Jane, but after a very long while, the shadows of sadness seem to be missing from her eyes. I believe she is happy... but... more cautious. She will take things slowly this time around.”

Guilt raised its head once again in Darcy’s breast. “I will own up to my part in her heartbreak and apologise to her before I go.”

“I... I believe you should be guided by Mr Bingley in this. You acknowledged your mistake to him and have taken steps to rectify it. He has shared with Jane whatever *he* felt relevant and necessary. Jane is already undergoing an emotional churn. Why... clutter her mind with something which would not reveal anything significant but may cause her unnecessary distress? If... she and Mr Bingley decide to reconcile in future, why would you want Jane to harbour negative feelings for his dear friend? ”

“If you are sure?” Darcy asked doubtfully.

Elizabeth nodded. If an additional reason for the advice was her reluctance for Jane to harbour any negative feelings for the man *she* loved, she did not acknowledge it aloud.

“Hmm... very well. I won’t say anything for now,” Darcy agreed. “Elizabeth, I... I feel we should tell Millie the truth about Mrs Dawson,” he added after a moment.

Elizabeth’s eyes widened, “Oh, but... how...” her voice petered out.

“I think she has a right to know that her grandmother will not be coming back,” he said very quietly.

“I agree, Alex, but how to tell such a small child that everything she holds dear is now no more?” Elizabeth asked in distress.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Let me try. I hope I do not cause her any more distress than is inevitable,” he said, then held out his hand to Elizabeth. When she placed her own in it, he clutched it a little convulsively.

“Millie? Poppet, would you come here for a moment.?” When the child came to him, he bent down to pick her in his arms.

“Does Millie remember she asked Dawcy to send a message to her grandmother?” he asked the child in his arms.

Millie nodded wordlessly.

Darcy tried to clear the constriction in his throat, but it refused to budge. “I... I received a response to my message today, my dear.” His heart twisted painfully at the sudden hope in those lovely eyes. Even as he felt like a heel for destroying that hope, he hurried on with his explanation.

“We cannot go to your grandmother, child, as she has already gone away to be with your mother. She asked me to tell you that your mother was feeling very lonely. Now that Millie has Dawcy and Beth to keep her company, Gran- ma decided to go to Millie’s mama, who had no one with her,” he said softly, then watched helplessly as tears started flowing from her eyes. Millie knew that one day her mama had gone and had not come back again. She understood.

“Will Millie stay with Dawcy and Beth forever?” Darcy asked, feeling quite afraid of the child’s silence. He started breathing only when the child nodded slowly. As Millie slowly rested her head on his shoulder, he hugged the child tightly. With his free arm, he then pulled a silently weeping Elizabeth to him. He tried very hard to be strong for the girls in his arms, but a few tears escaped his eyes too. Millie had seen so much loss in her short life - so much pain. The unfairness of it angered him, but some things in life were not in the hands of mere mortals. However, he could try to ensure that from now on, little Millie had all the care and affection she deserved. That she was Aunt Mel’s granddaughter only made it more satisfying.

The child raised her head and asked suddenly, “Millie can’t see Gran- ma, ever?”

Darcy hurriedly wiped his eyes and tried to think of a way to tell her the truth in the least hurtful way. Then he remembered how Aunt Mel had tried to comfort a five-year-old Georgie when *their* mother had passed away. It had helped Georgie. He could but try with Millie, and

it would be fitting if it helped the little girl.

“Not the way you used to, poppet. But she and your mama both are looking after you from far up in the sky. See there?” He pointed to two stars shining brightly in the sky. One, slightly bigger than the other.

“That big star is your Gran-ma, and the one next to her is your mama. See, now they are together, aren’t they?” Millie looked at him and nodded, then looked up again.

“You can tell whatever you want to them, and if they twinkle, then they are smiling down at you, poppet.” As Darcy waited hopefully, the bigger star suddenly twinkled very brightly.

“Did you see that Millie?” he asked excitedly. Little Millie looked at him and smiled slightly, “Gran-ma smiled,” she whispered, and Darcy nodded. “Yes, she did, sweetheart. And if sometimes it rains or there are clouds in the sky, you might not be able to see them, but remember they will always be up there watching over you,” he added softly.

Millie nodded, then with a soft sigh, she rested her head on his shoulder once again. Darcy carried Millie to a nearby bench and guided Elizabeth along. He sat down and pulled Elizabeth next to him. He rested his face on Elizabeth’s hair and started to hum the lullaby that had helped Millie sleep a week ago. He sang with a prayer in his heart that when little Millie woke up tomorrow, she would do so with hope and peace in her heart.

As the young people in her garden had taken quite a lot of time to come back, Mrs Gardiner had followed them outside a little while ago. Consequently, she overheard Darcy’s conversation with Millie. She hurried inside when the three sat down on the bench. Darcy’s soothing voice was still reverberating in her ears as she rushed into the drawing-room and collided with her husband, who was on his way out.

“Madeline?” He asked in puzzlement, catching hold of his wife.

“You were right, Edward. Lizzy has got herself a gem,” she said in a

voice clogged with tears and hugged her husband.

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Epilogue

Some Entries from the Diary of Fitzwilliam Alexander Darcy

19th April 1812, Darcy House

One week ago, when I had woken up in that inn, full of despair, who knew that exactly a week later I would be retiring for the night, with my heart brimming with a happiness that I had never expected to feel.

Elizabeth, my life - Thank you.

You are right, as always – Millie, Georgie, you, and I (and hopefully some more additions along the way!) are going to be one happy family.

It has only been a few hours since I left you at Gracechurch Street, but I miss you already with an ache that I can't express. It is best that I go to sleep and wait for you to come to me the way you do, every night - since I don't remember when!

Sweet dreams, love!

20th April 1812, Darcy House

Today Richard and I went to the Doctors' Commons and both of us got special licences! Given the exorbitant cost, Richard was not very keen on one, but Aunt Susan does not want to take any chances with banns being read. She does not trust Aunt Catherine! She paid the fee and told Richard to consider it his wedding gift!!

Richard is after me to talk to his parents about my impending nuptials. Says, Aunt Susan is in a mellow mood presently, better to seek her blessings now. I suppose it is sensible, her support can make Elizabeth's life that much easier - will go tomorrow. I hope they are not going to be too difficult.

Bingley came in the evening. He was quite upset that I kept the truth about Elizabeth from him. But was his usual forgiving self when I told him about the need for secrecy. We will be going to Meryton the day after tomorrow. Luckily without Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst.

Together we went to Gracechurch street. I breathed easy for the first time since yestereve when I saw her - my Elizabeth. Never knew love can actually cause physical discomfort. Very strange - but it does.

The poppet appeared much happier than yesterday, was ecstatic with the small sketch of 'Ginga' that Georgie had drawn for her! Very unfairly, I got a kiss for it. But then Georgie got a red wibbon that Elizabeth had bought for the little one. It gladdens me to see her generosity of spirits. The ribbon reminded me of – braiding. I am waiting impatiently for the day I can braid those chocolate tresses. Hmm.. not a very good idea to think of such things just before retiring!

Good night, Elizabeth, my love!

21st April 1812, Darcy House

The meeting with Uncle Harry and Aunt Susan went very well. Although it did not begin so. Uncle Harry came the Earl over me in the beginning! Had to wait for half an hour before he came out of his study. Cannot remember when something like that happened before! Although Richard and Anne kept me company all the while. Happiness becomes Anne. I am glad she is so content now. It was a long time in coming.

Aunt and Uncle came together to the parlour. They were not precisely cold but there was a vague feeling of - disappointment? I told them about Elizabeth, and Uncle Harry said - 'you have already got the licence, might as well have sent the wedding invitation to inform us!'

The hurt was very visible then. I begged his pardon for being so tardy but couldn't help being honest. Told them they are a necessity in my life, but Elizabeth IS my life! I asked her because I couldn't wait any longer. There was a moment of silence then Aunt Susan told my uncle

– ‘If she brings him this much happiness then she is family - no more discussion.’ ‘When do we meet her?’ she had asked me. I told her we are going to Meryton tomorrow as I had to seek Mr Bennet’s consent.

‘Wait a moment? The young lady’s father is not yet aware that his daughter is to be married. And you already have a special licence?’ Uncle Harry sat laughing for quite some time.

‘Oh, Darcy, my boy, you made my day!’ he said, and just like that, things went back to being normal.

‘You can walk the boards if you want,’ Richard told me as I was leaving. Kicked his shin while passing him, I think after nearly two decades - felt good.

Had my supper at Gracechurch Street, Georgie also accompanied me this evening. She and Elizabeth performed a duet, and for me, that was the high point of the evening...

Miss Bennet and Bingley are taking things slowly - but steadily. Bingley’s eyes are shining again!

Told Elizabeth about my meeting with uncle and aunt, her relief was palpable. It was clear she had been worrying over it, my poor darling. Wanted to take her to the garden and kiss her under the stars... But Mr Gardiner just stuck to me like a ... Ah, well - will have to make do in the dreams.

Will be eagerly waiting for you, my heart!

22nd April 1812, Netherfield Park

Came to Netherfield this afternoon. Bingley’s aunt, Mrs Hardy accompanied us; she will be the one keeping house for him. For part of the journey Miss Bennet travelled with Bingley and Mrs Hardy. While Sarah and Millie slept, Elizabeth and I talked to our hearts’ content.

I made a useful discovery, dropping a book on the carriage floor is an easy way to determine if your co-passengers are really sleeping or well... helpfully pretending!!

Then, there was confirmation of something I already knew – Elizabeth is a Very Stubborn woman. I wanted to meet Mr Bennet today. She would not let me. The experience with Mr Gardiner has affected her more than I thought.

She categorically told me, ‘I would not be able to bear it if Papa insults you or make a sport of you. First I will tell him the truth about last week - then only you can meet him. Come tomorrow morning, Alex.’

‘But who will explain to them about Millie and Sarah’ I had asked.

‘I will,’ was the categorical response.

‘But...’ before I could say any more she dropped Mrs. Radcliffe’s latest novel on the carriage floor, and then I was kissed full on the lips, as Sarah and Millie slept along.

If this is how she is planning to win arguments, I am afraid I am not going to win any in the future! I will have to ensure she does not read my diary.

When we reached Longbourn, the cacophony at the door made me rather glad that she had forced me to come on the morrow. By then, maybe I will be able to start implementing the ‘tolerate, ignore or accept doctrine for pesky relatives’ in letter and spirit.

Sleep tonight is evading me. I hope Mr Bennet is not going to say no - he won’t - he can’t!

But as always thoughts of her soothe me..

I will be dreaming of you, my darling! Sweet dreams.

23rd April 1812, Netherfield Park

9th May - the day I am to be married, exactly a fortnight from now! Not really able to put a name to this fizzy feeling I have in my veins. Appears to be a strange mixture of Joy, euphoria, anticipation and just a tiny bit of fear.

Elizabeth had already worked her magic by the time Bingley, and I

reached Longbourn this morning. Mr Bennet was not only expecting me but received me in a far more effusive manner than I have ever seen him exhibit. The reason was soon apparent. Elizabeth appeared to have told him a somewhat heroic account of my rescue of her and Millie. Well - I have no reasons to complain. My petition for her hand was summarily approved. He did baulk a little when I told him that I want us to be married in a fortnight. But the mention of Millie's guardianship smoothened things out.

'You are a kind man, Mr Darcy!' He had said. My Elizabeth seems to be working overtime to repair my image in Meryton! I'll have to make sure I don't go around offending people like last time. But nothing is too hard, where her happiness is concerned!

Then there were felicitations all around. Mrs B was a happy surprise - except for subdued felicitations for the betrothal, she did not bother me much. Not sure if it was because Elizabeth has said something to her, or she is too busy directing her energies to bring Bingley and Miss Bennet - Jane as she asked me to call her, together. Bingley always could bear Mrs B's effusions more gracefully than me - but I am also trying... I suppose in time Mrs B, and I will tolerate each other beautifully!

Did get a chance to kiss my darling to celebrate our betrothal. But then - Bingley and Jane entered the room by the French windows. I am not sure which of the four of us was more red. Though I was miffed at the time, now I think it was for the best - I was getting a little carried away!

Hmmm...

Good night, my darling girl!

PS: Had brought up Wickham's misdeeds with Mr B. It seems he is already taken care of, for the moment at least. Miss Mary King's uncle is a canny man. He did not give his approval for her betrothal with the scoundrel. As one would expect, he tried an elopement, was caught, beaten, and taken to Colonel Forster. That good man has ensured that he no longer vitiates the atmosphere in Meryton. But he would be trying his tricks somewhere else. Will have to talk to Richard about

what to do with him... but that is for later.

27th April 1812, Netherfield Park

Life was never this good!

Each morning starts with Elizabeth at the Oakham Mount. I am slowly beginning to believe that the beauty of a sunrise at the mount just might compare with the ones on the mountains of Derbyshire. Mayhap it is because she is there with me to enjoy the beauty?

The more I get to know Elizabeth, the more thankful I am that I came to Netherfield last year - and I had almost refused Bingley's invitation! But then some things are destined...

Life has been busy the last couple of days - with dinner engagements, card parties and such. Mrs B is not leaving any stones unturned to flaunt her daughter's felicity in the neighbourhood. Surprisingly everywhere I go, I am feted as a brave heart returning from war. The rescue story is doing the round. I asked Elizabeth about it. She gave me the most impish of smiles and a cryptic - 'Things are working out as Richard had suggested,' It was only after a lot of cajoling that I was enlightened. Anne had expressed her worry to Elizabeth that the ton might consider Millie to be my baseborn child!!

It appears my darling would not hear of my name being besmirched in this manner (oh, my sweet girl!). Richard's solution was to let my rescue act be known far and wide. He believes the more people are aware that I came upon Millie and Elizabeth when the accident happened - Less would be the chances of any absurd accusations. Elizabeth has slyly taken the help of Mrs B's gossiping cronies to achieve her ends. I have to say she is very successful. I am so admired in the neighbourhood at present that I am unable to believe that these are the same disapproving people from last winter. Frankly, I do not have to do *anything* to change their impression of me, but still, I am trying to be more approachable - for Her!

Till now, Georgie and Richard were the two people in my life who were protective of me, but Elizabeth beats them both, hands down. I

find I rather enjoy this feeling of being cherished. Instead of being the strong, protective presence I have always had to be due to the circumstances.

The wait till 9th appears interminable now,

Good night! My Elizabeth..

28th April 1812, Netherfield Park

The poppet has got a new and most unlikely of friends - Lydia Bennet. A couple of days ago we went shopping for some clothes for our little girl. Today Lydia decorated Millie's new bonnet with her favourite pink ribbon! The happiness in the child's eyes was priceless. Now she follows Lydia around everywhere - and contrary to my fears is treated with the utmost kindness.

Elizabeth and I have made it a point to spend as much time with Millie each day as was possible to give her a feeling of stability. The sweet child has already seen too many upheavals and changes in the last fortnight. However, it seems with Lydia around, Dawcy and Beth are no longer necessary. It is good she is spreading her wings.

I am also realizing that for all her frivolity and wildness, Elizabeth's youngest sister has a core of kindness. It has again reminded me how judgemental I was in my last visit here. But I am trying my best to get to know Elizabeth's family better this time around.

Jane and Mr B are really pleasant companions. Not that Jane has much time to spare for me. I believe Bingley would not be able to last more than a few weeks before he pops the question to her.

Alas! Mary's sermonising is never ending. Luckily she keeps her mouth shut when she plays chess. I find it is best to invite her for a game if I want to engage in a conversation with her - no real conversation - but a very tolerable way to pass the time!

Catherine is the only one who truly keeps her distance from me. Except for the pleasantries, she never shows much inclination to talk to me. But I have noticed that she is rather quiet otherwise also. I do

not press her, as I have the comfort of knowing that there is now a lifetime to build the bridges... Although I sincerely hope it will not take that long!!!

I have now come to believe that accepting Elizabeth's family as mine will not be as much of a chore as I had thought it would be.

I truly am trying, darling Elizabeth. Tomorrow I leave for London. Mrs B at least would be happy; she believes my presence distracts you from the very important preparations and fittings etc., for the wedding. Well, I can't say I blame her. I hope you will address her complaints while I am gone, darling heart.

The next few days without you will be agonising, Elizabeth. However, the memory of the kiss I stole from you this evening just might make things a little bearable.

Sweet dreams, my sweet..

2nd May 1812, Darcy House

Tomorrow, Georgie, Mrs Annesley and I go back to Meryton. Anne, Richard, and his Parents will follow only on the 8th. Sebastian will not be able to travel because of Emily's confinement. No matter, we will meet them in Derbyshire soon enough. And Aunt Catherine... I do not really want to think about her.

All I can say about the days I have spent in London is that they have been productive. The marriage contract is prepared. Elizabeth's rings are ready. I have also planned our wedding tour since Elizabeth gave me a carte blanche (HA.. HA.. Dirty thoughts, Darcy!). The arrangements for our trip to The Lakes are complete.

After the wedding, we will stay here in London for a se'nnight for Elizabeth to procure anything missing in her wardrobe. Then all of us will travel to Pemberley. I do hope, the poppet will adjust to Pemberley in three days - as we then leave her in Georgie's care. I believe so - as she is now very comfortable with her Miss Dawcy.

Then... I take Elizabeth to one of my favourite places in the world

with the hope that she likes it as much as I do. I can't wait to get her on my own..

But before that, there is the ball Bingley is throwing for our betrothal tomorrow. I wish I could dance my night away with Elizabeth, however, there are the duty dances to go through. I do not find the prospect as repellent as I used to. Perhaps it is all a matter of perception. Or mayhap it is because of the four dances with Elizabeth that I look forward to.

Elizabeth, darling, I missed you so much in these few days. The thought that I will be seeing you tomorrow is keeping the sleep at bay... but I will try to sleep. As the sooner this night goes by, the sooner I can come to you..

Sweet dreams, sweetheart.

4th May 1812, Netherfield Park

Mrs Hardy and Bingley had worked stupendously hard to make the ball a success. The setting was as beautiful as that on the night of the 26th of November last year. The anticipation with which I had waited for Elizabeth was also the same. The only thing that was missing – thankfully – was my frustration with that anticipation. And yes, the vitriol that Miss Bingley had spread with her pin-prick like comments was also missing.

I stood with Bingley in the receiving line only till the Bennets arrived. But then, I do not think Bingley had the time to notice anyone else after Jane came and stood next to him. Just behind her was Elizabeth, almost ethereal in her gown of cream and gold. I was not even aware that my mouth had dropped open until Mr B murmured in my ear, 'If that is how you look at young women you find barely tolerable, I would be very keen to know how you look at women you find handsome enough for your tastes, Darcy' and then he chuckled in that special way of his and went away. It seems I will not easily be allowed to forget that reprehensible faux pas. In a way, it is good.

As the guests of honour, Elizabeth and I had started the dancing. This

time I did not forget to ask her what type of conversation we must have. She wanted to know how much I had missed her. Told her I would like to show her if she would take a walk with me. 'Tell me when?' the minx answered. It seems she had come to Netherfield today with the express purpose of driving me insane!

Just before the second dance, Mr Bennet made the announcement of Jane and Bingley's betrothal. I was engaged to dance with Jane for the second dance but willingly released her from the obligation, for Bingley was staring quite pitifully at me. The sudden lightness I felt made me aware that the weight of the guilt I had been carrying ever since I came to know of Jane's partiality for Bingley had melted only now.

The last dance of the day was a waltz, and Elizabeth was back in my arms. In the previous two dances, all we had discussed was Jane, Bingley, and their future felicity. I was now more than ready to talk about us! I told her about the wedding tour I had arranged, and she expressed her happiness with a delighted smile. I asked her then - had she been the one making the choice, what would it have been. To my gratification, she also chose The Lakes. 'But... I would begin our wedding tour from somewhere else - just for a day or two.' She told me with a wistful smile.

I asked her to enlighten me, and her answer left me feeling all warm and fuzzy! She wanted to go to Bassingtonstoke - Mrs Webster's farmhouse, to be precise. 'It is the place where I fell in love with you - a place closest to my heart!' she had whispered in my ear.

However, she was also worried about Mrs W's reaction when she came to know of our charade.

I had no option but to tell her then - 'Elizabeth, my sweet, she already knows. Just as I was taking my leave of her that day, she told me that when next we visit, she would look forward to being introduced to 'Stephen Dorsey' and that we better take out Miss Bennet from the trunk we were hiding her in!'

Elizabeth blushed and hid her face in my chest. Luckily, we were waltzing near the door to a balcony, and I made us dance our way

out! I had anyway been dying to get her to myself. Out there under the sky, I took delight in comforting her, and then as I had promised, showed her how much I had missed her!

And I am missing you now, my love. It's nearly 3 o'clock, and I am writing this in order to remember each and every nuance of your expression. But I believe it will be better if I sleep, otherwise, I might miss our early morning meet tomorrow and that I can't have...

Until then Elizabeth!

8th May 1812, Netherfield Park

Tonight, My heart is so full of emotions, and there are so many thoughts in my mind that I find I am quite unable to express much of anything...

Except for that one thought that is an ever-present chant of my heartbeats –

Tomorrow you will be my very own in every possible way – my dearest, loveliest, Elizabeth and... I can hardly wait!!

12th May 1812, Bassingtonstoke

I have brought Elizabeth here today because... how could I not? If this was how she wanted our wedding tour to start then - that is how it would start. Also, both of us had truly wanted to meet Mrs Webster before we travelled north.

Belying her fears, Mrs W did not mention anything about the pretence we perpetrated when we last visited her. As soon as she opened the door, this time without her rifle, she pulled Elizabeth in a hug. "Welcome Elizabeth, Fitzwilliam," she said with a delighted smile... and that was that.

Jonathan Webster is still recuperating; I suppose it will be another month or so before he is completely well. He has decided to leave the army and stay here in Bassingtonstoke. The change that his return has

brought in Mrs W is seen to be believed. I am glad we came here.

As I write this, Elizabeth is behind the screen, changing her clothes for the night. One would think she would let me help with the task. After all, my willingness for it can hardly be doubted! But... For all the ardency she shows me when I love her, she is still very shy in some ways. I find it enchanting.

Ah... there she is.. my Elizabeth... my wife.

Finis

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# About The Author

I have always been an avid reader, with mysteries and Regency fiction being two of my most preferred genres. While Jane Austen has been a favourite since I was introduced to her in school decades ago, JAFF was something I discovered only in 2018. I was mind-blown to get access to endless enchanting stories of my favourite fictional characters by so many new authors.

I had never before thought it possible that I could or ever would come up with a tale of my own. But while reading JAFF, I was often struck by thoughts such as why a particular character is always depicted in a certain manner, or why do they not act as would be more prudent in their circumstance... and many more. These myriad thoughts have finally culminated in me picking up the baton and - coming up with a few of my own alternate imaginings of Ms. Austen's timeless story of pride and prejudice. Personally, I like low angst stories with HEA that are made interesting by witty banter between the characters. More often than not my endeavour would be to reflect the same characteristics in my own stories!

Hope you enjoy...

S. Neha

[i] Two parts disguised - drunk

[ii] The ready - available money; cash.

[iii] Abigail – a lady's maid

[iv] The necessary (n) - lavatory

[v] Leg shackling– To Marry

[vi] Hessians – A style of men's riding boots

[vii] Coxcomb - a vain and conceited man; a dandy.

[viii] Not in petticoat line - not in the habit of pursuing women

[ix] Cit – A contemptuous term for a member of the merchant class